

My Journey from Dialysis to Transplant!

As a child, I lived near Santa Maria with my family. When I first joined the workforce, I worked in the insurance industry, where I remained for the next 32 years of my professional career. Throughout this time, I was blessed with an amazing husband, four kids, and seven grandchildren. To my fortune, all four of my children and five of my grandchildren live nearby to this day. I lived what most would call an average lifestyle, my husband and I going to work and spending time with our family. But in 2019, my life changed completely.

In 2019, I went to my primary doctor for a routine checkup visit but came to find out that my lab results indicated kidney damage. As I had no prior personal or family history of poor kidney health, this caught me extremely off guard. Around the same time, I was taking ibuprofen for my shoulder pain. Unknowingly, this over-the-counter medication exacerbated the damage to my kidney, and as the months went on, my lab results became progressively worse. Although my doctor and I hoped that my kidneys would bounce back, they unfortunately never fully recovered. Realizing that I would need more kidney-specific care to address my condition, I started to see a nephrologist in my area. The transition to seeing a nephrologist regularly and changing my lifestyle to be more renal-friendly was more stressful than I thought, as it felt like a constant chore to always try controlling my blood pressure. Additionally, although I wasn't in the "critical zone" at the time of my initial labs in 2019, issues began to arise with my kidneys, prompting me to consider going on the kidney transplant waitlist. Throughout, I always thought to myself, "If it was that much of an emergency, my nephrologist would be seeing me more often".

The emergency I was worried about came in March of 2020 when I went in for a kidney transplant consult at the UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles. Something that day caused me to have severe hypertension and a BP of 80 over 50. I was rushed to the hospital to receive an emergency catheter, and it wasn't until this point that I genuinely feared for my life. In addition to this health emergency being a stressful experience, my husband was not allowed in the hospital with me due to COVID-19. I had to deal with the news of dialysis, my deteriorating health, and making big decisions about the future of my kidney health all on my own. As all of the rising issues continued to build upon each other, I felt increasingly stressed as I had to start making important decisions immediately, such as where I would soon start dialysis. In fact, the doctors would not let me leave the hospital until I found an open spot at a clinic to start hemodialysis (HD).

One good thing that came out of this hospital trip was meeting Dr. Anjay Rastogi. Instead of waiting for an opening at a dialysis clinic in Santa Maria, I decided to start hemodialysis at DaVita in Century City where Dr. Rastogi works. Although I was hesitant about driving to Los Angeles three times a week, the DaVita team was very persuasive and provided amazing care for their patients. Dr. Rastogi and his team were extremely supportive and were there to answer any questions I had.

A few months into HD, Dr. Rastogi informed me that I would be a good candidate for peritoneal dialysis (PD). In the moment, although everything Dr. Rastogi told me was helpful, the amount of information I had to process in such a short period of time was overwhelming, and it would have been helpful to have my husband there to retain the information and to help me make my decision. I was hesitant to transition to PD, the thought of having to hook myself up to a machine in my own home frightened me. However, after working with Dr. Rastogi, I deeply trusted his judgement, so I switched over to PD only a few months after I started HD. Since starting PD, I have decreased the number of days I do dialysis and my labs have come out of the critical zone. PD is still something I do not look forward to, but I have gotten used to now. It is my “new normal”.

In such a short period of time, my life was flipped completely upside down. Although starting my kidney journey during a global pandemic was not ideal, I have learned a lot about myself throughout the process. Not only have I learned to take care of my body in a completely different way, but I have also realized that I am stronger and more capable than I ever imagined I would be.

MARIA AND JOSE DUENAS TRANSPLANT JOURNEY

For Maria, asking for a kidney was something she knew she would be hesitant to do. It is difficult to ask someone to go through a major procedure for you, knowing all the risks that can come with it. However, Maria never had to ask, she had a long line of volunteers willing to donate a kidney to her. There are always worries on the recipient's side if anything were to happen to the donor due to complications, but Maria quickly realized that “you just have to learn to accept that people want to help you.”

One of those people that were eager to volunteer to donate a kidney was Maria’s husband, Jose. Once he found out that Maria needed a kidney transplant, he immediately without any hesitation wanted to donate one of his kidneys to her. Other people such as her kids and her siblings were willing to donate as well, but Jose wanted to be the primary donor. They didn’t want to put their kids in a situation where they would have to take time off work, worry about medical expenses, and take time away from their own kids. After constantly telling her “I’ll do it, I’ll do it,” Jose started to go through the evaluation process in order to see if he was eligible to donate.

For Jose, the evaluation process went quickly. It included blood work, chest x-rays, evaluations on if he was sure he was willing to be a donor, stress test on a treadmill, and COVID testing. Up until the end of the evaluation process he was a match, but antibodies got in the way. Because of that he could not be a direct donor, so Jose and Maria viewed their other options and opted for the kidney exchange program, hoping he could be a match.

A series of physical evaluations also included some emotional evaluations. Jose was asked why he wanted to donate, and if he wanted to change his mind, or if someone was forcing him to do it. He

was told the possible risks and the potential of finding an illness he may not have known about as he goes through all the eligibility tests. All these risks and worries never phased Jose and he was 100% sure about his decision. The only thing that was on the back of his mind was “Am I healthy enough to donate to my wife?” He was told that his lifestyle should be the same and that if there would be any complications with his kidney in the future, he would be moved up on the list as a transplant candidate. With all the support from Maria and Jose’s friends and family, they have almost nothing to worry about.

Maria and Jose Duenas are scheduled for surgery mid-September through the UCLA Kidney Exchange Program. They couldn’t be more grateful and are looking forward to the future with no more dialysis, more quality time with family, and a second chance at a healthy life.

Please see this article on Home Dialysis in LA Times:

<https://www.latimes.com/science/story/2020-09-16/to-evade-covid-19-dialysis-patients-bring-their-treatment-home>