

Kevin Olson and I met in August 1976 at West Point when we were both assigned to Company A-4 at the end of Beast Barracks. Over the next four years, we became good friends as we endured and overcame the challenges of being a West Point cadet together. Physical education development classes and tests were a given part of being a cadet and, for the most part, we took being physically fit for granted as young people often do. Kevin was an excellent wrestler and led our company intramural team both as a competitor and as a coach. After graduation, Kevin branched into the Army Signal Corps and went to his basic course at Fort Gordon, GA, while I branched into the Army Corps of Engineers and went to my basic course at Fort Belvoir, VA. Over time, as we left school and the military, we lost touch.

As the years turned, we would occasionally see each other at West Point Class Reunions and catch up. At our 40th reunion in 2016, Kevin showed up using oxygen and let us know he had been diagnosed with Pulmonary Fibrosis. At the time, I didn't know anything about PF, what caused it, what the impact was, or the prognosis my friend was facing. At the reunion, our wives and the wife of our friend Paul Maier became good friends and decided the six of us needed to get together more often. And so we did. We met up in Dallas several times and during each trip I learned more about PF. With each trip, we watched as Kevin's dependency on oxygen increased. At first, he only needed it when performing physical activity, but over time the need grew to when just sitting around.

In October, 2019, the six of us met up in Albuquerque, NM for the Balloon Festival. During this trip, Kevin used oxygen the entire time. Paul and I took turns carrying the batteries for his portable oxygen generator, and Kevin was able to walk long distances on the balloon grounds and sightseeing. It's a testament to his strength that we didn't skip any of our planned activities during this "bucket list" trip.

A couple of months after that trip, Kevin started experiencing a pretty rapid decline in his ability to breath. By spring, he had to replace his oxygen generator with one that could provide higher oxygen concentrations. In the midst of the global pandemic, we communicated frequently via Zoom calls and email. Kevin provided updates on his trips to visit the medical teams at Barnes Jewish in St. Louis. To me it seemed like a long and complicated process where eventually your name might end up on the transplant list. In one of his emails Kevin said, "A lung transplant is a big decision. It is not like you get new lungs and all your problems are solved. You are trading in one set of issues for another different set." It was hard watching him struggle not only physically, but mentally and emotionally with all the things surrounding a lung transplant. Then, at a doctor visit at the end of June, the doctors told him they were going submit him to be put on the list. That surprised and shocked Kevin...and all of us. The first prayer of many prayers had been answered!

As part of preparing for a potential transplant, it was important that Kevin be in as good of physical condition as was possible. Kevin asked Paul and me to help him with his motivation to walk for 30 minutes on the treadmill every day. He told us that some days he'd be tired or depressed and he'd feel like blowing it off. Our game plan: if he didn't report walking thirty minutes by 3pm each day we were to call him. We guess the "threat" of a call from his buddies worked, because I never got to call and reprimand him for not walking. In addition to the physical conditioning, there were more tests and consultations that had to take place. During this period, time seemed to drag on and on from my point of view – I can't imagine how hard it was for Kevin to "hurry up and wait" for news.

Finally, on August 7th, Kevin was officially on the list. We were all excited but couldn't get too excited since it might be weeks or months before getting called. Then it happened. Barnes Jewish called and told Kevin they had a donor. My reaction was a combination extreme joy and fear. I was on the verge of crying as it hit me as to the magnitude of this surgery and the uncertainty of the outcome. I notified all our classmates in A-4 and kept them in the loop during the surgery and the recovery process. Many prayers by people of many different faiths were said. Kevin's surgery and the first few days of his recovery were textbook. My expectations were high and I felt a sense of relief. Then there were complications, more tests and additional procedures. It was like a wild roller coaster ride. It took a month before Kevin was discharged. That was a joyous day. We continue to celebrate every day as Kevin continues to make progress through rehab. We can't wait for the day he gets to leave St. Louis and go back home. And I look forward to many more "bucket list" adventures in the years ahead.