

Kevin Olson is a friend and West Point classmate of mine who was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis several years ago. After graduation in 1976 we had become disconnected due to life circumstances, distance, etc. In October 2016 we reconnected at our 40th reunion.

It was at this time I learned of his illness. Being naive I didn't put much thought into how his condition was affecting his and Dana's (his wife) lives.

In May 2019, Kevin and Dana were traveling nearby to attend a grandchild's event and were able to visit with Linda and I for a couple days. The daily challenges the Olson's were dealing with were becoming evident. Managing oxygen bottles, carrying a Portable Oxygen Concentrator, oxygen consumption, scheduling activities around the physical challenge, etc. This is the short list.

During this visit Kevin had to negotiate a walk from the car up a terraced landscape to a restaurant. He managed it slow and steady. I was impressed with his ability to handle it.

We had conversations during this visit about how he and Dana shared the normal responsibilities of life such as property repairs, grocery shopping, meal preparation, etc. It was becoming more obvious how these seemingly simple, routine things are very challenging in the lives of PF patients and those around them. The commitment and love that Kevin and Dana displayed was evident in their determination to enjoy life in spite of PF.

In October 2019 we attended the Albuquerque International Balloon Festival with the Olson's and friends Barb and Greg Schmitz. Kevin did well but other life challenges were becoming evident. We were leaving the hotel for extended periods of time that required more extensive planning. A spare Portable Oxygen Concentrator, and spare batteries for both Portable Oxygen Concentrators were lifeline type necessities but also provided the freedom for the Olson's to participate in the day long balloon lift off. We all assisted with managing these needs. It was at this time that Kevin's oxygen consumption began to increase. The transplant option was in our conversations but only in passing.

Over the next few months there were Zoom sessions between the six of us. There were laughs and stories shared but the effect of PF was becoming more evident. Kevin's ability to participate in a conversation was diminishing. He had to speak slowly and needed pauses every three or four words to breathe. His oxygen consumption continued to increase, and transplant was coming up more often. In discussions with Linda we both shared our observations about how his color had changed, his talking was slowing, breathing was more labored, etc.

In July 2020 the progress of PF forced a decision. The Olson's were headed to Barnes Jewish in Saint Louis for an evaluation. This was an epiphany for me for sure. While we had had some brief discussions around transplant, this was an evaluation that could result in a transplant recommendation and being placed on the list. I did not expect this to happen. I was expecting some mix of therapy, therapeutic drugs, etc. that would get him to a better place.

Linda learned of the transplant recommendation before I did. When she told me, I was shocked. There was no better option that could extend life or improve quality of life. The progress of the disease qualified Kevin for a transplant.

Evaluation, testing, interviews, a return trip to Barnes Jewish, etc. then one short week on the list all resulted in the call that donor lungs were available. This created a series of emotions, hopes and fears that are too hard to describe. Suffice it to say that whatever Barb, Greg, Linda and I were going through; it was minor compared to Kevin and Dana.

In the nine weeks after transplant there were several highs and lows. On day 4 after transplant Kevin had already walked 1000 feet and "rang the bell." Then there was fluid on the left lung, fatigue, low hemoglobin, etc. These issues were interspersed with progress; increasing time and distance on the treadmill, resistance training and walks in the park. Zoom sessions reflected the ups and downs they were going through. Kevin, with Dana at his side, showed determination to get better.

Then on October 16th we were all able to get together in Saint Louis for the weekend. The visit was filled with laughs, encouragement, and camaraderie. Maybe it even helped with a little bit of a morale booster.

Testing in the week after the visit showed there were no signs of rejection and that lung capacity was increasing. Excellent news! Kevin and his rehab specialist Ron increased the challenges in his daily aerobic and resistance workouts.

It appears that Kevin is set up for longer and better quality of life for he and Dana. Medical science and God have provided him with an opportunity. He is no longer a PF patient but rather a PF survivor and lung transplant patient. Now it is in large part up to him. This new status presents a new set of challenges. These include maintaining focus, setting and achieving goals, improving endurance and mobility, etc. A lot is on his plate for sure, but he is showing the ability, has strong support from Dana, a healthy body and a positive outlook. The future looks very bright.