

Practicing What You Preach

STA's living donor and recipient tell their stories

Editor's note: In January of this year, the story broke that Southwest Transplant Alliance's (STA's) director of public affairs Pam Silvestri was going to be a living donor for her friend and STA colleague, Jennifer Cox. This is their story, in their own words.

Jennifer's Experience

Each year kidney transplant patients take what is called a "GloFil" test to determine kidney function. GloFil is actually short for glomerular filtration rate (GFR).

In December 2008, my numbers were 22 percent. I was concerned about this low number because I knew it was greatly reduced from the 36 percent the previous year. I'd already had kidney failure once.

After I repeated the GloFil test the next December, I received a letter from my transplant center letting me know that my number had dropped down to 19 percent. It was below the point at which it is advised that you get re-listed for another transplant.

That news was disturbing. I didn't have a lot of time to focus on it, however, because my daughter, Tiffany, was very sick. She had been diagnosed with lupus when she was only 5.

Being responsible, I started the process of getting re-listed. About six months later, on June 19, 2010, my name was added to the transplant waiting list. I was still able to function and feeling OK, so I continued to care for my daughter, who also needed a kidney.

I prayed for God to take care of me and to provide the kidney I needed—so that I could continue to be the mom and provide the care that Tiffany needed. She was in her early 20s and had lived almost her entire life with lupus.

GOD IS 'GOING TO USE ME'

On July 16, my dear friend Pam Silvestri called me with some life-changing news. She told me to just listen to her, that I didn't have to reply, and I could just hang up the phone when she completed the conversation.

She told me that she was going to donate a kidney to me, and that she didn't want me to worry. I said that I wasn't worrying, and that I knew God was going to take care of me. She said, "He is, and He is going to use me." That was the conversation, and she said goodbye.

I hung up the phone and immediately called Tiffany, who was very excited for me. Tiffany went on to tell me that I was getting the new kidney because God has lots of things He wants me to do.

Then, only two days later, Tiffany suddenly passed away. I spent the next six months grieving the loss of my darling only daughter.

I was on the list and moving toward transplant, which was on and off my mind. I knew I needed to be as healthy, emotionally and physically, as possible, so I asked God to heal and comfort me so that I might move forward. I knew that's what Tiffany would want. I started to heal.

THE DAY WAS SET

After several months, Pam went through her testing and proved a match. The date was set for Fri., Jan. 14. I was so excited that the date had come for me, but I was nervous for Pam since she had never been in the hospital for anything. My momma instincts were moving in.

Pam and her friend Marge, my husband Henry, my son Anthony and my sister Barbara and I met that day at 5:30 a.m. We all hugged each other and talked a bit, and then Pam went her way for 7:30 surgery, and I went mine for a 9:30 surgery.

Everything went perfect! I remember someone coming to take me to the surgery suite, and next I was waking up in the ICU. In recovery, I watched the changes in my skin color, and being able to see the whites of my eyes was wonderful. Kidney failure happens so slowly that you don't see all of the changes until you are changing back to normal after receiving the new organ.

I can speak only from the recipient side, but it is worth getting listed and receiving the transplant you need. Transplants are life saving, and life changing.

I am now starting my new life for the second time because of caring people who donate their organs after death, and those who love others enough to donate while they are alive. If you have a loved one who needs a kidney, I encourage you to see if you're a match.

As for me, there is one less name on the waiting list.

Pam's Experience

I started working at Southwest Transplant Alliance (STA) on July 11, 1995, only a month after Mickey Mantle received his liver transplant. I'd been working in sports promotions and had worked with the Mantles.

As fate would have it, Jennifer Cox received her kidney transplant from a deceased donor, Toby Jones, on July 29, just about two weeks after I joined STA. After Jennifer healed, she called our organization wanting to know how to reach out to her donor's wife.



On Jan. 17, the *Dallas Morning News* published a photo essay chronicling the transplant; the photos here are reprinted with permission. The middle photo captures Pam's (left) and Jennifer's joy when they see each other the first time after surgery. Photos/David Woo/*The Dallas Morning News*.

We began talking, and Jennifer told me she wanted to give back for the amazing gift of her transplant by volunteering. Since she was working at Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in South Dallas, she began reaching out to the area's black churches. She did an amazing job, and ultimately came to work with STA as our minority community advocate. She also befriended her donor's wife, Beverly, and they are good friends to this day.

Over the years, Jennifer and I also became friends. We discussed our marriages, our families, our most private thoughts.

Jennifer also shared with me that her transplanted kidney was beginning to fail and that she'd need another transplant before long. I called her transplant hospital, and I learned that our blood types were a match.

More testing remained, but that first news was good.

ON CLOUD 9, THEN TRAGEDY

I called her to let her know not to worry about getting a kidney—I'd give her one of mine. We were on cloud 9. Jennifer was coming out with her first book, *Broken Dolls: Gathering the Pieces*, about caring for a child with a chronic illness. We were planning the promotion of the book and preparing for me to be tested as a donor.

Two days later, Jennifer called to tell me Tiffany had died unexpectedly. She was 24. We went from cloud 9 to the depths.

Jennifer came through this tremendous loss the way she always does—with her faith. Her two sons, Trey and Anthony, were rocks for their mom through that difficult time. At Tiffany's funeral, Jennifer told everyone she had no regrets about Tiffany's life because they'd said everything they'd needed to say to each other. They both knew they were loved.

She asked all of us in attendance if our relationships were all where they needed to be, so we'd have no regrets if something unexpected happened.

Whew. That statement gave me pause. It pushed me to get my relationships in order, and I spent the next few months doing just that. Thanks to Jennifer, I now have truly meaningful relationships with my family members.

We went through all the testing—24-hour urine samples, chest X-rays, abdominal scans, blood glucose tests, labs and more labs, EKGs and the always-fun psych evaluation. We finally learned that we were a match, and surgery was scheduled for Jan. 14.

I attended Jennifer's church with her the Sunday before the surgery, and her elders prayed over us. Pastor Tony Evans also brought us to the podium to share our story.

The *Dallas Morning News* ran our story that same day. The attention was a little overwhelming for someone used to staying behind the scenes and helping get out stories about other recipients and donor families.

I believe I am just doing for a good friend what we should all consider doing for our good friends—and, if that happened, I think we could get rid of the kidney wait list.

IT'S A NEW DAY

Jennifer's sister's friend picked me up that morning, and we drove with Jennifer's sister to the hospital, where we joined Jennifer, her husband Henry and her son Anthony. We all hugged and laughed and cried. And then it was time to go.

The nurse came in my room and asked all of the same questions I'd answered a million times before to be sure I was doing this of my own free will.


And then the very handsome anesthesiologist walked in. He was Italian, and when he began speaking with his Italian accent, I had the feeling all would be fine.

My next memory is waking up, and I thought we were headed into surgery, but it was over. Amazing. We'd agreed to let the *Dallas Morning News* document the surgery, so there are photos (see link below). Seeing your own innards is a little weird, I must say.

The TV crews came the next morning, and Jennifer and I finally got to see each other. She looked so healthy and beautiful and happy. And she had so much energy. What a gift to be able to give to my good friend, who'd given so much to me.

The funniest thing that's happened since surgery is coming back to work and checking voicemails. The first said, "This is Mike from Channel 5. I'm reading in the paper that you're giving a kidney to Jennifer Cox Friday morning. Wait, is that today?"

"Well, maybe that's why you're not answering your phone!" 📺

 Visit the *Dallas Morning News*' website at dallasnews.com/incoming/20110117-a-gift-of-life.ece?ssimg=105080#ssTop105081 to see the photo essay of Pam Silvestri's and Jennifer Cox's story.

At Southwest Transplant Alliance, living kidney donor Pam Silvestri is director of public affairs and two-time kidney recipient and author Jennifer Cox is minority outreach advocate.