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ACTOR AND LIVER TRANSPLANT RECIPIENT, SHELLEY FABARES, SAYS SHE IS GRATEFUL FOR WHAT SHE HAS GAINED THROUGH HER ILLNESS AND TRANSPLANT

LOS ANGELES CA (April 21, 2003) – It was bad enough when Shelley Fabares fell through the floor joists of her under-construction home back in 1994. In that fall, the actor, who is best-known for her starring role as Christine Armstrong in the sitcom, “Coach,” broke all the ribs on the left side of her body, but she had no way of knowing that she was facing other, far more serious health issues. She needed a liver transplant.

In the emergency room, doctors treated her broken ribs and recommended that she follow up with her own physician in a few days – merely as a precautionary measure. However, to everyone’s surprise, the follow-up evaluation showed liver counts that were, in her words, “off the charts.” Although doctors were unable to identify the precise cause of the problem, over the next several years, she took medications, and seemed to stabilize. Her liver counts remained above normal, but they seemed to plateau.

Then, in early 1999, things took an abrupt turn for the worse. One day without warning, she experienced what is known as an esophageal bleed – sudden and severe bleeding in her esophagus – and was rushed to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center’s Emergency Department. “I was terribly ill,” she recalls.

When she had been stabilized, her physicians explained to her the seriousness of the situation. This episode was linked to progressive liver failure, and she needed a transplant. John Vierling, M.D., a nationally renowned hepatologist and Medical Director of Cedars-Sinai’s Multi-Organ Transplant Program, explained that her liver had failed to the point that it could not be reversed by medicines and that she could have another bleed at any time that could be fatal.

Fabares and her husband, actor-director-producer, Mike Farrell, were in disbelief. “I really thought that the transplant was just a ‘safety measure’ at that time,” Fabares recalls. “Something that I might not need at all.” Eventually, though, she came to terms with the fact that if she did not get a new liver, she would die.

In April 1999, she was placed on the liver transplant waiting list. She knew that it could be a long wait. Indeed, the demand for donor livers far outweighs the supply. “More than half the people on the liver transplant list don’t live long enough to get one,” she points out. “I was very much aware that I was living on borrowed time.

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The strain was enormous, but there was also a level of acceptance within me. There are no words to express what this experience is like – physically, psychologically and spiritually.”

For example, she describes having her dedicated “transplant” pager go off with a “false alarm” – which it did several times when people dialed wrong numbers: “It was heart-stopping. Mike and I tried to calm ourselves, because we honestly thought we might die of stress before we ever got the transplant,” she says with a chuckle. “Eventually we learned not to over-react when the pager went off.”

Filled with anxiety and questions, Fabares turned to Dr. Vierling and to the surgeon who would lead her transplant team, Steve Colquhoun, M.D., Program Director for Liver Transplantation at Cedars-Sinai.

“They are brilliant, kind and good people,” she says. “They were willing to talk to us until I am sure they were blue in the face – helping Mike and me to understand what was happening and to stay calm. They saved my life and very literally gave me a new one. These are truly extraordinary individuals.”

As Fabares waited for a donor organ – with mixed feelings of expectation and dread – her condition steadily worsened. “I was simply exhausted all the time,” she remembers. “I wasn’t in pain, but I was sleeping almost all the time. I would wake up thirsty, start to get up and go to the kitchen for a glass of water, then think, ‘No, I’m more tired than I am thirsty,’ and give up and go back to sleep.”

Finally, on October 23, 2000, after waiting 22 months for a liver, the pager went off, and it was the real thing. “We have your liver,” said Dr. Vierling.

Fabares’s transplant was successful. It’s now been nearly 3 years, and she says while she wouldn’t wish this experience on anyone – and certainly wouldn’t want to repeat it – that in some ways she has been very blessed by what came out of it.

“I have been so changed by this experience,” she says. “Even though life has returned to some degree of normalcy, I’m a different person. What is important to me now, and how I approach life is very different than it was before. I am so incredibly blessed by the man I am married to. I was so very ill for such a long time, and we didn’t know what was wrong, but he was with me every step of the way – accompanying me to every doctor’s appointment. He’s just monumental, and I don’t know how I could have gotten through this without him.”

“Situations like this – catastrophic illnesses – can tear some families apart, but ours only got stronger and closer. I’m grateful for my life. Grateful for my doctors. Grateful for what I have learned about myself and about life. And most of all, I’m grateful for my husband. I’ve gained so much.”

Cedars-Sinai will host a Transplant Reunion Picnic and Fun Run/Walk on April 26, from 10 a.m. – 3 p.m. at the Cheviot Hills Recreation Center, 2551 Motor Avenue, Los Angeles. Liver transplant donors and recipients, heart transplant recipients and transplant surgeons, coordinators, nurses and physicians will be on hand for media interviews.

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