

# Transforming the Transplant Experience

BY ROBIN HEFFLER

In 2005, Lori Dunn was told that unless she received an organ transplant, she would not survive. Chronic liver disease quickly deteriorated her health.

She was admitted to Cedars-Sinai and began a long journey through a multitude of evaluation tests to determine whether she could undergo the difficult 4- to 12-hour long surgery. Then one day, she received a visit from

Chris Klug, an Olympic snowboarder who had received a liver transplant a year and a half prior to winning a bronze medal in Salt Lake City. Chris Klug was doing a meet and greet at Cedars-Sinai. His visit made a lasting impression on Lori.

“There were times during all that testing and waiting when I thought, ‘I don’t want to do this anymore,’” recalls Lori, a lively woman with a big heart and a ready smile. Just a few days after Chris’ visit, on July 24, 2005, Lori got a new liver. Today, she is healthy and leads an active life, including working part-time as an organizer for a labor union. “I held on to Chris’ words and got through it. Now, I’m so grateful for a second chance at life. I celebrate the date of my transplant as my second birthday.”

Lori has turned her gratitude into an opportunity to help someone else get a second chance. Every Wednesday, she leaves her Chatsworth home at 6:30 a.m. and commutes more than 30 miles to Cedars-Sinai to meet with a patient who is waiting to go through a battery of medical tests, a patient who is often as tired, frightened, and sick as Lori was three years ago.

She volunteers in the Ambassadors Program, a small, dedicated group of transplant recipients who guide prospective transplant patients and their families through both the testing and the emotional ups and downs associated with the procedure.

The program began in early 2007, when staff members of the Center for Liver Disease and Transplantation—part of Cedars-Sinai’s Comprehensive Transplant Center—were searching for a way to streamline the screening process for transplant candidates.

“We found ourselves seeing more and more patients,” says Dr. Steven D. Colquhoun, surgical director of the Center, where an average of 60 liver transplants are performed each year, mostly to treat hepatitis, a chronic liver infection. “To be efficient and make it easier on patients, the transplant team essentially decided to try evaluating each patient in one day. For that to happen, we had to get them from one test to another swiftly, without them getting lost in the Medical Center.”

The team turned to former transplant patients, recalling that many of them wanted to do something to give back to the hospital that had saved their life.

“At the time, we didn’t fully appreciate what this fairly simple idea would become,” says Dr. Colquhoun, “what it would mean to patients to have someone who has had a transplant meet them and their families at the door, take them around, and tell his or her own story. They can see how good the person looks post transplant, and they can talk to someone who will have empathy, who will know how scared they are. There’s an instant bond, and suddenly they are so much more comfortable.”

**O**n a Wednesday in March, Lori sits with Alfredo R.—a healthy looking man in his early 40s in the beginning stages of liver disease—after he receives a pulmonary exam, the last stop in a four-hour morning marathon that also included cardiac, imaging, and laboratory tests. “I came in with a very negative attitude,” he says. “I never thought I would meet someone who had survived a transplant, and today I met three! Lori lifted my spirits and opened my eyes. She answered my questions about how the body reacts to a new liver and how long recovery takes.”

Randi Swersky of Sherman Oaks is a soft-spoken woman radiating warmth. She had a transplant two years ago and has been volunteering almost weekly since the Ambassadors program began. She says that new patients often have many questions when they meet her: They want to know about how long she had to wait for a transplant and what to expect. They want to know about the pain, feeling tired or hungry, or the medications that they will have to be on for the rest of their lives. Sometimes, they even ask if they can see her surgical scar. “I’m providing them with the knowledge I always wanted, but unfortunately didn’t get before my surgery,” she says.



PHOTOS BY RICK NAHMIAS

***“Sharing my experience with new patients and family members is incredibly rewarding because I know they feel much better after they’ve met us.”***

—LORI DUNN,  
PICTURED HERE WITH  
RANDI SWERSKY (RIGHT)

***“When I’m introduced to patients and they hear that I had a double transplant, I can already see relief in their faces.”***

— MICHAEL ADAMS



Currently, there are seven active Ambassadors who are available to escort the three to five new patients needing evaluations for transplant each week. Like other Medical Center volunteers, they go through an application and interview process, attend a hospital orientation, and receive a health screening. Then they’re trained for their particular job, which often includes shadowing nurses through the transplant testing process.

“Besides escorting the patients through the evaluation, our main focus is to have the volunteers show our patients that there’s a good life after a transplant,” says Barbara Leanse, director of Volunteer Services. “When you bring people in who have already walked down that path, they can embrace, support, and educate new patients.”

Transplant volunteers are supervised by John Pappas, a youthful and upbeat social worker for the Comprehensive Transplant Center. He leads a weekly support group for up to 20 transplant survivors and candidates, as well as an online support group for 150 patients and their families.

“The Ambassadors Program helps to normalize the transplant experience for both the patient and family members,” he says. “Symptoms of liver disease can be extremely difficult. Most patients are dealing with extreme fatigue or insomnia. Some have confusion, disorientation, or hallucinations, while others have gastrointestinal bleeding or water retention. Someone who has been through all this and is now OK can give hope to someone going through it now.”

Another Cedars-Sinai volunteer plays a similar role in the Lung Transplantation Program. Michael Adams was emaciated from cystic fibrosis and near death before he had a double lung transplant at Cedars-Sinai five years ago. Today, he drives 55 miles every Thursday from Rancho Cucamonga to visit with patients on the lung transplant list and makes outreach calls to others.

“When I’m introduced to patients and they hear that I had a double transplant, I can already see relief in their faces,” says Michael, whose health rebounded so well that he won a gold medal in tennis at the 2004 National Kidney Foundation Transplant Games. “Volunteering also helps my psyche a lot,” adds Michael. He is good friends with the mother of his organ donor, a 15-year-old boy who died after being shot point-blank. “It makes her feel good when I’m volunteering,” he says, “like her son is still doing something through me.”

All the volunteers talk about appreciating the hugs and thanks they receive, but also point out other benefits. Working as an Ambassador inspired Randi to enter a two-year program where she is studying to operate ultrasound equipment. She and Lori have also formed a deep friendship.

“Randi and I laugh about the things we did when we were confused because of our liver illness,” says Lori. “At the same time, sharing my experience with new patients and family members is incredibly rewarding because I know they feel much better after they’ve met us.”