April is Organ Donor Awareness Month

Health Science Center employee receives kidney from caring co-worker

San Antonio (April 24, 2006) – Patti Ruffin, 51, an employee at The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, knew that one day she would need a kidney transplant. As a member of a family in which multiple members have a disease called polycystic kidney disease, it was only a matter of time.

Ruffin, who joined the Health Science Center in 2001 after working at the UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas since 1981, is an upbeat personality. She remained so even during two years on dialysis after her kidneys failed. During those two years, she continued working 6:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. weekdays and going to dialysis from 3:30 to 8:30 p.m. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. She managed to swim three-quarters of a mile at a local pool every Thursday, and a mile on Sundays. She remained active in her choir and traveled with her husband, Mark. She took only two days of sick leave during her time on dialysis.

Ruffin is the education consortium coordinator with The Trauma Institute of San Antonio, Texas (TRISAT) in the department of surgery, and it was in the trauma surgery division that she met the person who would donate a kidney. Julie Reineke has worked for the Health Science Center’s University Physicians Group since 2002, but it was only last year that Ruffin became her cubicle mate at TRISAT. Then they started talking.

“Patti was telling me she was in kidney failure and dialysis,” says Reineke, who is 20 years younger than Ruffin. We learned we have the same blood type. I said, ‘Why don’t I check and see if I am compatible?’ not really thinking I would be.”

But she was compatible. She then lost more than 50 pounds, which was a personal goal anyway, to meet the doctors’ guidelines for the surgery. “Being in the medical industry, I have read some of the follow-up reports on kidney patients,” Reineke said. “I learned it generally is a successful surgery and the quality of life is good afterward.

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“I’ve always donated blood in the past, and this was just a little more invasive,” she added. Her superiors at University Physicians Group were extremely supportive, even supplementing her paid leave for the surgery and recovery period.

Polycystic kidney disease, or PKD, is a genetic disorder, and Ruffin wants to educate people about it. PKD affects more than 600,000 Americans and an estimated 12.5 million people worldwide. The Polycystic Kidney Research Foundation offers complete information about the disease at http://www.pkdcure.org or 1-800-PKD-Cure.

PKD is marked by multiple cysts that enlarge the kidney and ultimately cause renal failure. “My kidneys were very large, and there was concern about infection and bleeding,” Ruffin said. The cysts also had affected her liver, which was enlarged and crowding her stomach.

The transplant took place Dec. 15, 2005, at University Hospital. Health Science Center faculty removed both of Ruffin’s kidneys and part of the left lobe of her liver. Glenn Halff, M.D., performed the liver resection, Robert Esterl, M.D., performed the kidney removal and transplant, and Greg Abrahamian, M.D., harvested the donor kidney from Reineke. Just 48 hours after the transplant, Ruffin was doing so well that she was off all pain medications.

Ruffin calls it her Christmas gift. “It came from Julie, a co-worker I met only a year ago, so that makes it all the more mind-boggling,” she said. “Now I have a 20-year-younger kidney.”

Reineke now lives with one kidney and knows it is a call to take care of herself. “Really and honestly, I didn’t know Patti yet, but it was having a conversation and finding out about a need,” Reineke said. “I think I would have done it for anyone. Somebody needed to do it.”

Sadly, just a week after Ruffin’s transplant, her older sister, Karen Brown, died in Virginia of complications from PKD. This turn of events brought into even clearer focus the immense value of Reineke’s donation to her co-worker.

Reineke’s husband, Sean, had Hodgkin’s disease a decade ago at the age of 21. Doctors were able to use Sean’s own stem cells for his transplant. Julie remembered wondering, what if he had needed someone else’s stem cells? Perhaps that came into play this time, for when Patti Ruffin needed a kidney, Julie Reineke didn’t hesitate. She came through.

To learn more about organ donation, call the Texas Organ Sharing Alliance at (210) 614-7030 or see http://www.txorgansharing.org/.

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