

A breath of fresh air

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By Chantelle Lusebrink

Issaquah woman trains for marathon with new set of lungs



Carla Trulson-Essenberg works out four times a week at Klahanie Fitness on a treadmill and with weights. Below, Trulson-Essenberg is thumbs up at the University of Washington Medical Center after her double lung transplant surgery (left), then recovers on her couch at her Klahanie home.

By Greg Farrar

Nearly four years ago, Carla Trulson-Essenberg, didn't dream of walking to the mailbox. She couldn't. Even with oxygen at 56, the slight incline

from her doorstep up her driveway was an impossible obstacle.

But today, she is breathing new life into someone else's lungs and training for Seattle's Rock 'n' Roll half-marathon.

"I feel younger than I did when I was in high school," she said. "I did not know that people breathed like this. I always thought one had to work at it."

Trulson-Essenberg had a double lung transplant Oct. 31, 2004.

"Ninety-four percent of recipients three years after transplantation live their lives with no assistance. They aren't just surviving, but they are thriving," said Mike Mulligan, her surgeon at the University of Washington Medical Center. "Carla is representative of that."

Trulson-Essenberg has had breathing problems her entire life, but she said she refused to think of herself as anything but normal. "I did everything my brothers and sisters did," she said. "It was the only life I knew, didn't know what normal was. I thought I was normal."

When she married her husband, Dave Trulson, he would help drain her lungs with special massages every morning. Despite her health, she had two healthy children, Kirsten, 29, and Eric, 26.

But as she aged, instead of giving her life, her lungs were taking it.

"I would make dinner in the morning and slip it in the oven in the evening, because by 4, I'd be out of energy," she said, adding that she would have to pick and choose events and couldn't attend many of her children's athletic events.

It was a slow decline, she said, and she didn't realize it was happening or how far she'd deteriorated until picking up her daughter at Pacific Lutheran University in 2000.

"I phoned her room number and apparently had the wrong number. I just thought, 'I'm going to have to find her. How am I going to do that?'" she said. "At that point, I knew something was wrong."

When she went to her doctor a couple of years later, he diagnosed her with pseudomonas, a small bacteria in the environment that healthy lungs typically fight off. But hers couldn't.

She was referred to Dr. Mark Tonelli, a pulmonary and critical care physician with the UW Medical Center in 2003.

"Her diagnosis, when she came in, was already clear. The question was, 'Is she ready for transplant?'" Tonelli said. "With her, she wasn't ready and we were trying to treat her with additional therapies to keep her from needing a transplant. But she was pretty far advanced and we started talking about transplant the first time I met her."

"My first reaction was, 'Oh no, my kids.' Would I see my daughter get married or my son graduate college?" Trulson-Essenbergsaid. "But all of a sudden, I remembered all the blessings I had, a wonderful husband, like Dave, and two children who knew and love the Lord."

"I knew no matter what happened, whether I died, I would be in God's presence, here on earth or in heaven, and that sustained me," she added.

There are roughly 50 double lung transplants each year at the UW Medical Center, which makes it one of the most active programs in the country, Tonelli said.

While the procedure has evolved, it's still risky, because lungs are more prone to be rejected by the body, he said.

In fact, the survival rate among lung transplant patients after five years is between 50 percent and 60 percent, he said. But when a transplant is the only option left, he said, people are usually within one to two years of dying, and Trulson-Essenbergsaid was there.

"Committing to the transplant process and having faith in the transplant team, then fully applying themselves to what they are asked to do can optimize their outcome," Mulligan said. "It's not a matter of changing out one set of organs for another set. It is a huge physiological assault to the body."

Trulson-Essenbergsaid she doesn't know much about the person whose lungs she has, only that it was a teen or young adult from Oregon.

"From the beginning, I knew someone else would have to lose their life to give me mine. So, I prayed for my donor every day, that they were living a life filled with joy. I also prayed for their family," she said. "I would love to meet the family and thank them, and let them know the gift they gave has affected so many other lives."

Despite heavy scarring and nearly two years deterioration of her lungs before joining the transplant list, her surgery was successful, even though the initial recovery was hard, Mulligan said.

"I want to emphasize how important it is," Trulson-Essenbergsaid. "My life has totally, totally changed because of someone's gift, and I know I'm one of God's miracles and I give him all the glory."

Today, she said she spends her time doing whatever she feels like. Much of that time is dedicated to helping other people going through the transplant process.

"I hope my story gives them courage to pursue this further," she said.

She also spends time with her family, waiting for the arrival of her first grandson, painting and walking vigorously, in attempts to walk longer distances faster.

“I heard a rumor — if you don’t finish in four hours, they shuttle you to the finish line,” she said. “There is no way I’m going to be shuttled to the finish line.”

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