



Len Geiger

CHRONIC OBSTRUCTIVE
PULMONARY DISEASE

“I cherish my life now more than ever before, and I wouldn’t trade it in for a ‘normal’ life for all the money in the world.”

I had just turned 35 and still thought I was going to live forever, but then I was given the worst news I thought I'd ever receive. After several years of being told that asthma was causing my increasing breathing troubles, my physician told me that I had Alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency, a genetic protein deficiency that caused me to develop a form of severe, progressive, and irreversible chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

With one phone call, I was suddenly forced to recognize my own swiftly approaching mortality for the very first time.

I had lost over 60 percent of my lung function and needed IV infusions every week. Within two years I had become so ill that I could no longer work. Eventually, my wife and I divorced. I had lost everything by which I had defined myself. I was evaluated and placed on the list for a double lung transplant.

During this difficult time, I recognized two unalterable facts. First, I could only survive with a positive attitude—negativity would kill me. Second, my breathing was only going to get worse, so I needed to get in the best shape possible to prepare for whatever the future would bring.

I took steroids to help my breathing, but they kept blood from reaching my hips, which eventually had to be replaced with titanium. The surgeries made exercise even tougher and my lungs continued to deteriorate, but I kept a positive attitude.

In 2002, the University of Virginia's transplant center had lungs for me. In a flurry of activity I underwent the eight-and-a-half-hour, double lung transplant procedure. Korinne Shroyer, 14, saved my life, and I would later meet her family and run an 8K-and-half marathon with her father, Kevin.

Len Geiger

CHRONIC OBSTRUCTIVE PULMONARY DISEASE

- COPD is an umbrella term used to describe progressive lung diseases including emphysema, chronic bronchitis, refractory (non-reversible) asthma, and some forms of bronchiectasis. This disease is characterized by increasing breathlessness.
- COPD is the third leading cause of death in the U.S. — 12 years earlier than predicted.
- Every four minutes an individual dies of COPD.
- COPD kills more women than men each year. In 2006, COPD killed more American women than breast cancer, Alzheimer's disease, and diabetes.
- The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute estimates that 12 million adults have COPD and another 12 million are undiagnosed or developing COPD.

Source: COPD Foundation—
www.copdfoundation.org

Just a few days after surgery, I was walking again on a treadmill, faster than I had in years. Since I could breathe again, I wanted to elevate my exercise regimen, but I was unable to run because of my hip replacements. So, I took up mountain biking. My lung transplant was less than three months old when I wrecked my mountain bike. After surgery on my left femur, my new lungs stopped working. I was put on life support and placed into a drug-induced coma. Almost three weeks passed before I could breathe on my own.

Even with extensive physical rehabilitation, it was weeks before my knee would bend and several months before I could put any weight on my repaired leg. Still, I focused on my attitude and goals, and I emerged ten months later in the best shape of my entire life.

I cherish my life now more than ever before, and I wouldn't trade it in for a "normal" life for all the money in the world. I am enjoying my new opportunity for life and love with my wife, Christina, and our daughter, Ava Corinne.

As an Alpha-1 patient advocate, I actively promote awareness, early detection, and treatment. I also provide support to individuals diagnosed with the disease. One of the first things I tell a newly diagnosed patient is that they have a long road in front of them. The decision they must make is what attitude they will carry on their journey.

Len Geiger was a patient speaker at the ATS 2008 International Conference in Toronto, Ontario.

