

“My Body is Failing Me”

The Struggles of Kidney Failure, from Childhood to Adulthood

By Destene Savariau

It was spring of 2010 in Snellville, Georgia. I had been sick for weeks, continually vomiting and passing out around the small apartment. My mother and everyone else around me didn't know what was wrong. I was taken to emergency rooms from Lawrenceville to Decatur. All had doctors who just told us “it's just the flu” or “it's just acid reflux.” It wasn't until I was taken to a holistic medical facility called Progressive that I found out I had kidney failure. Of course, that only happened after many extensive and kind of gross tests, the most difficult of which was having to swallow a camera pill, which was actually kind of cool. It was difficult and uncomfortable, but interesting nonetheless. After those tests, we went home and came back the next day to hear the results. It was me, my mother, my two aunts, and my two siblings. My siblings sat in the waiting room playing with one of my aunts, while my mother, my closest aunt, and 11-year-old me sat in the crisp white room in anticipation, the tension killing us. Or killing them at least, I was practically half passed out. By the time the doctor came in with the results, all I remember hearing was “kidney failure” and “lucky to be alive.”

The most specific term of my condition would be acute renal failure. It is where both of my kidneys stop working due to loss of ability to filter the waste from your body and balance fluids. To solve this until transplant, the patient will receive dialysis. This treatment will do the kidney's job of removing excess water and toxins from the blood. Though this condition is somewhat minor in its manageability, it also has a domino effect on the rest of the body, causing high blood pressure, cardiovascular or heart problems, and lungs weakening.

After that, I was blacking out repeatedly until one day I woke up in a hospital bed in the Intensive Care Unit of Children's Healthcare of Atlanta - Egleston Hospital. I had a catheter in my thigh running hemodialysis, tubes up my nose and down my throat. I was on bed rest and on heaps of drugs, keeping me high as hell and unaware of my surroundings for a good month. My family was devastated and heartbroken. It was scary! When I was finally a bit more stable, I was still stuck on bed rest. At least there were no more tubes in my nose and throat, and I was able to eat. After about another two weeks, I was moved to residential floor nine. After that, my hospital stay was actually enjoyable.

As a child in a fully dedicated children's hospital, there were always activities to keep me entertained. Arts and crafts on Mondays, bingo on Wednesdays, and movie night on Fridays, not to mention the teen room with board games and game systems on the floor, the library with tons of books and movies to rent, and a plethora of volunteers who would come and play with you. Hell, I even got to hold a hedgehog when the zoo came to visit us. Honestly, I remember the last month of my stay in the hospital as very pleasant. Luckily after an uneventful year, I got a kidney transplant from a deceased donor in Hurricane Sandy. It takes three hours to put me to sleep, cut open my abdomen, set in the kidney, and close me up with staples and glue. And I don't mean the office kind. This gave me a working kidney in place of my old ones and led to my life going back to a new normal due to a few permanent changes. The main one being having to take medicine every day to prevent my body from rejecting the foreign kidney.

This kind of adjustment, especially as a child, was hard. But I got through it with my family and friends' overwhelming support and an overall positive idea of what it meant to be sick. Whether

I was in the hospital or not, friends from school would send me cards. People from my mother's church would supply me with an endless battalion of teddy bears. Even the hospital staff showered me with gifts to keep me comfortable. Although I was sick, I felt like I lived in luxury, even after my health improved with the kidney transplant. However, this wouldn't last as in 2019, when my transplant kidney would fail, and I would end up right back at square one.

When I was a Housatonic freshman, my health was deteriorating, and I didn't know why. My blood pressure was slowly rising. My blood work levels were becoming more and more unstable. I had more frequent visits to the hospital, which was a giant inconvenience to my educational career. It got to the point where my transplant kidney finally just gave out. At first, I thought things would be like when I was younger; oh boy, was I wrong. Being sick as an adult is nothing like being sick as a child. It was a colossal inconvenience, fewer gifts and attention; the hospital wasn't as fun. Most of all, it was a lot more responsibility. I had to make extreme changes to my diet, including water intake, to prevent any more stress to my kidney.

I take medicines and monitor my ever-rising blood pressure twice a day; I take pills for my resulting lung and heart problems. On top of that, I have to write down everything I eat and drink to watch my food intake and its correlation to my blood pressure. This time around, being sick actually really sucked. It was hard balancing all this newfound responsibility, as I had only recently transitioned into adulthood. Of course, I had a stable support system, but most of the duties fell on my shoulders, and I didn't know how to handle it or balance it all. I was already struggling with school, work, and my newfound adulthood. Having to dedicate so much time to my duties on top of that began to take its toll. I ended up slacking off on my daily rituals by missing doses of my meds and not taking care of myself the way I should be. This resulted in one of the scariest experiences of my life.

It was late morning, and I wasn't feeling very well. I had shortness of breath and chest pain that wouldn't go away. When I checked my blood pressure, it was high due to the missing dosages: 200/126 high. I started to freak out, which only added fuel to the flames, and called the ambulance. When they arrived, they immediately whisked me away to the nearest hospital. On the way there, I suddenly lost sight, which caused me to panic. The sirens began to blast as they rushed to Bridgeport Hospital.

Everything went downhill from there. My eyes were stuck in the back of my head, and all I could do was listen to my surroundings. Doctors were yelling, nurses rushing, security trying to hold me down as I panicked even more. Then everything just stopped. The last thing I remember was feeling a strange jolt in my body as the voices around me began to get increasingly louder. Until they faded away, and I felt a sharp pinch in my neck. When I woke up, it took me a while to get my bearings. The doctor said; my eyes rolled back as an early sign of a seizure, which led to a stroke. Hearing that shook me to my core. Luckily, there were no long-standing side effects. Still, it provided me with a traumatic reminder that I needed to take care of myself.

Trying to live life with this condition is an uphill battle, one that I sometimes feel that I'm losing. Seeing as how this is a condition that I'm still going through, it's still something I am trying to overcome. My leading solutions are to find creative ways to stay positive and to take every day at a time. This can sometimes be challenging, especially with the constant routine of pills and early morning dialysis sessions. But it helps to find fun activities that I can associate with my medical ones. When I have dialysis, I watch tv and play on my Nintendo Switch. When I have hospital visits, I try as hard as I can to treat it like a hotel vacation. (Just without all the needle probing and nurse visits.) I read comics at doctor's appointments while I wait and always treat myself to a nice lunch afterwards. Being sick the

second time around may not be the same experience as when I was a kid, but I'm making the best of it. That's all I can do until I find someone willing to donate a kidney. If you or anyone you know is willing to donate, please visit