

"When you can't breathe, nothing else matters." I first read this statement on something sent to me by the American Lung Association. Since birth I have been coping with a genetic illness called alpha one anti trypsin deficiency. Over a period of several years different pulmonologists and family doctors misdiagnosed me, and my condition continued to deteriorate. Finally, in the summer of 1993 I was diagnosed by a pulmonologist in Lexington and learned that the only treatment options were (1) weekly infusions of the alpha one protein extracted from human plasma, which I did for twelve and a half years, and (2) lung transplantation. My lung function continued to decline, but the infusion therapy bought me years of time while science continued to work on advancements in transplantation.

On January 31, 2005, I was blessed to receive two donor lungs at Barnes Jewish Hospital, Washington University, in St. Louis, Missouri. It's hard for me to verbalize how it felt to live on oxygen for years and wake up after surgery with normal breathing. God certainly performed a miracle in my life! By spirometry my FEV1 was 18 percent (after using an inhaler) prior to transplant vs. being in excess of 100 percent six months post transplant. My FEV1 was 93 percent on my most recent spirometry on May 24, 2010. The FEV1 measurement is the maximum amount of air you can forcefully exhale in one second. It is then converted to a percentage of normal. I returned to work on June 1, 2005, which was four months after my transplant. I have been further blessed to have only experienced two lung infections since my transplant. The first one was a couple of years ago and resulted in my body starting to reject my lungs. I was sick for months before and after being admitted to the hospital in St. Louis for infusion of a drug that could only be administered in a hospital. Thanks to prayer and a good medical team I was able to overcome the rejection. Again, I give God the credit for my recovery.

Per instructions of the pulmonary rehabilitation team at Washington University I was to continue an exercise program. Since I have to be careful about sanitation and being around sick people, I wanted a place I could feel medically safe. Although I tried a couple of places, I ended up dropping out. I joined Shapes and tried working out on my own, but I was not successful. Also, I made excuses to myself not to go. Eventually, I dropped out there, too. On December 10, 2008, which was my 60th birthday, I was sitting at home in my usual state of tiredness when someone from Shapes called me about reactivating my membership. I arranged to start back the first week of January, 2009. Donna Denniston, the owner/manager was so caring and motivating that I felt encouraged to try to become more active with exercising. She suggested that I try working out with a personal trainer. That was a totally new concept for me, but I had already met Shalanta Nicely Gullett while showing me the equipment on the circuit and how to use it properly. She had such a warm and caring personality that I chose her to be my trainer. You see, I did not know how to exercise on my own with all of that complicated equipment. Although the Shapes staff were patient and willing to show me how to use it, I had a mental block about it and was intimidated and could barely remember from one time to another how to properly adjust and use the equipment. I certainly did not know how to safely exercise in my very limited physical condition. Also, I knew myself well enough to know that I would not push myself and that I needed an appointment twice weekly with Shalanta in order to show up at the gym.

With Shalanta's expertise and close supervision, I have made enormous progress. It has been a very difficult journey for me due to my muscles having to perform in ways they had rarely or never experienced via exercise due to my sedentary lifestyle nearly all of my life. She was patient yet strict in our work outs. I especially remember the first few times that she put me on an elliptical machine for one to two minutes. It was horrible! I kept saying to myself "Don't cry. Don't cry." Now I can do 20 minutes or more. How is that for progress! I have a goal of sometime in the future being able to participate in one of the aerobic classes without passing out. I'm serious! I cannot say enough good things about my personal trainer, Shalanta. She will always be a personal hero to me for her patience and knowledge in guiding me to where I am today and where we plan to go in the future. I would also like to give credit to Donna as well as the other Shapes staff. They have all played a role in my journey to fitness.

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