

Family helps in man's kidney disorder fight

By Lindsay Butler
Tribune



FAMILY SUPPORT: Blair Juniper, center, has received kidney transplants from his mother, Vanessa, and his brother, Jeff, as well as from his father. He's recovering from his latest transplant at the Arizona Transplant House in Scottsdale.

Paul O'Neill Tribune

Jeff Juniper's gift to his brother won't be wrapped with a bow this year. In fact, his brother Blair won't even see it. But he'll feel it. The two brothers are spending their holidays recovering from kidney transplant surgery. This is 29-year-old Blair Juniper's third kidney transplant, and the whole family is hoping it will be the one to work.

The first two kidneys came from Blair's father and mother, but they eventually failed.

"The holidays don't mean a lot. We've just kind of shrugged Christmas off this year," said Vanessa Juniper, Blair and Jeff's mother. "This is the most important thing."

She is staying with her sons at the Arizona Transplant House at Brusally Ranch in Scottsdale. The house, 11600 N. 84th St., is run by a nonprofit organization dedicated to hosting transplant patients from the Mayo Clinic.

While the Tucson family stays there for a few weeks, Vanessa Juniper will be responsible for getting her sons to their appointments and making sure they take their medication. Their stay is expected to stretch into January.

And they won't be charged a dime.

Visitors to the house are encouraged to pay a \$25 fee per night, but it's not required. The Arizona Transplant House Foundation gets most of its funding from previous occupants and corporate benefactors, said executive director Tom Davie.

The house has seven bedrooms, private bathrooms, a communal kitchen, a laundry room and two televisions.

"We want people to be comfortable here, so we make it as homelike as it can be," Davie said.

Still, Blair Juniper is anxious to get back to his life.

After his latest kidney failure, he had to go on dialysis four hours a day, three days a week, for two years. He was forced to quit his job and had to move back home with his parents.

His older brother, Jeff, 30, offered to donate his kidney, but it took four months of writing letters to get the time off from his duties with the U.S. Coast Guard.

Jeff Juniper knows his brother might reject the new kidney in a matter of years, and he admitted it bothers him.

"But the life he's got on dialysis is no life at all," he said. "And maybe in that time they'll find some kind of

medication."

Blair Juniper suffers from IgA nephropathy, a disorder caused by deposits of protein inside the filters within the kidney. Those filters usually remove waste from the blood, but IgA prevents the process, according to the National Institutes of Health Web site.

Juniper first received a kidney from his mother when he was 17. And while his friends were going to parties, he was carefully calculating his diet and trying to pick a career that would offer suitable health insurance.

"You hate to feel sorry for him, but he hasn't had a chance to do the things he wanted to do," Vanessa Juniper said. "It has been a devastating youth for him."

For five years after the first transplant, Blair Juniper went to work as a diesel mechanic. Then, without any warning, the new kidney failed him.

So his father, Dave, stepped up and proved to be an even better match.

"I would've given him another one," Vanessa Juniper said. "My husband felt the same way."

The two went through the surgery at what was then Scottsdale Memorial Hospital - it's now Scottsdale Healthcare Osborn. Things went fine for another four or five years until that kidney also failed.

Blair Juniper said his family is close, but dealing with his disease is definitely stressful.

"I don't think about it too much," he said. "I just try to be the best I can be. I think they know I appreciate it."

With his brother's healthy kidney, Juniper is hoping to work as a personal fitness trainer, and start the rest of his life.

"My friends are buying houses and having families," he said. "It's like I missed my 20s."

When the Junipers leave the transplant house, their spot will be filled right away. The house is nearly always full, and the administrators are forced to give priority to patients coming directly from the hospital. They don't have space for patients who need a place to stay for an annual follow-up.

But if all goes according to plan, that problem soon will be solved. Davie said the Mayo Clinic and the Arizona Transplant House Foundation are planning to build a transplant village on the northeast Phoenix campus starting next year.

The village would comprise five houses, each with six bedrooms, and allow for extremely easy access to hospital services.

Davie said each house would be similar to the current transplant house - homey, peaceful and nothing like a hospital.

"It's so comfortable," Vanessa Juniper said. "I can't say how much I've appreciated this house."