



Blair Juniper, left, has just had his third kidney transplant, this one from his brother, Jeff, after kidneys from his mother and father eventually failed. Here he hangs out with Jeff at the family home in Tucson.

**CHRIS RICHARDS / ARIZONA DAILY STAR**

## **Tucson Region**

### **The family that keeps giving life**

Thanks to mom, dad, now brother, he has 4 kidneys to

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**By Carla McClain**

The spirit of giving. We've heard a lot about it in recent weeks.

But one Tucson family truly understands the idea, with most of them giving up no less than a vital organ for someone they love.

In the case of the Juniper family, the gift is kidneys — three of them so far, the latest during the Christmas holiday, and possibly more to come.

The upshot of this extraordinary act is that Blair Juniper, 29, now has four kidneys — and a good shot at a healthy life — while his mother, father and older brother each have but one. They all gave their spares to him.

That kind of multiple live organ donation within a single nuclear family is incredibly rare. It's happened only five times in the 20-year history of 230,000 kidney transplants in the United States, national donor records show.

"It's kind of tough to say what this has meant to me. It's so humbling," said Blair Juniper, now recovering from his third kidney transplant near the Mayo Clinic in Scottsdale, where he got his brother Jeff's kidney on Dec. 5.

"This has definitely brought us all together — it's made us a very close family. They are working so hard for me, and it makes me feel like I can never do enough in return. I know I can't. But it's why I really can't wait to get home and get working again, get my life on track, because I know that's what they want most for me."

Blair's life went off track way too soon — 17 years ago, when he was stricken with a rare and little-understood kidney disorder at age 12. Known as IgA nephropathy, the disease starts with blood in the urine, signaling the abnormal buildup of a protein that eventually damages, and can kill, the kidneys.

With no treatment and no cure, it took five years to destroy Blair's own natural kidneys, putting him on dialysis by the time he was 17 and forcing the search for a donor kidney. At that point, his mother, Vanessa, and father, Dave, started arguing.

"It was very difficult for us — who would be the first donor," Dave Juniper said. "Vanessa and I had a lot of discussions about it — I guess you could say we argued over it. I really wanted to do it and so did she.

"But in the end, it was the surgeon who decided for us. I was the breadwinner and Vanessa was able to take time off, so she went first."

With his mother's excellent kidney working for him, Blair, a Santa Rita High School graduate, went to technical school and started his career as a diesel mechanic. He also returned to his athletic ways, playing baseball, football and riding motorcycles — despite the danger to a body with only one good kidney.

"We didn't want to slow him down," his father said. "This disease had already taken away too much of his active life."

Although Vanessa Juniper intended her kidney to sustain her son for the rest of a full and long life, she knew that wasn't likely to happen.

"I hate to say it, but yes, I knew it might not last," she said. "We were warned that the nephropathy could keep on attacking his kidneys. But I had such high hopes — I thought my kidney would go forever for him."

Hers lasted five years for Blair, who then went back to the terrible grind of dialysis, as yet another donor search was launched. This time, his father insisted.

"He's my son. I didn't even think about it. I was so ready to go," said Dave Juniper, who was 50 when he gave Blair his kidney.

"I got into shape for it. I went on an exercise regimen and lost weight. I had a zero stress level about it, no second thoughts at all. I'd give him a second one if I could."

This time, though, the aggressive disease took down the new kidney in just three years, putting Blair back on dialysis yet again. He stayed tethered to that machine for almost three years.

Although the entire Juniper family is a blood match for Blair — and thus able to donate their kidneys to him — there was tremendous reluctance to turn to his siblings — an older brother and younger twin sisters — for the next gift.

They are all young, with full lives ahead of them. Blair's brother, Jeff, recently joined the U.S. Coast Guard, meeting the military requirement that all vital organs be intact. The twin sisters have not yet started their families.

So the Junipers reached out to extended family and friends, unsuccessfully testing several as donors for Blair. They even tried a Web site to find matching stranger donors, also with poor results. Blair also went on the national list for a cadaver kidney, where the wait for the 70,000 Americans who need one now is three to five years.

But as his wait stretched to nearly three years, dialysis — the use of a machine to cleanse toxins from the blood — was taking a heavy toll on Blair.

"Dialysis really ages you, and Blair was starting to show the wear and tear of it," his mother said. Her son grew weak and fatigued, and his blood pressure began to rise dangerously. Chained to the four-hour dialysis regimen three times a week, he was unable to travel or go camping with his family.

Finally, Jeff Juniper said enough was enough. He could watch his brother suffer no longer. "I just got tired of seeing him trapped by dialysis. It wasn't going well for Blair and it was time to stop that. I just told him I was going to do this and that was that," he said. Even so, it took months to persuade the Coast Guard that Jeff could function normally with one kidney. After he wrote a series of letters up through the chain of command, he finally got the military's OK.

And so, on Dec. 5, Jeff, 30 — who turned out to be the closest match of all for Blair — gave the ultimate Christmas gift to his baby brother. Both have sailed through their operations with no complications and little pain. Jeff goes back to the Coast Guard tomorrow, and Blair will return to Tucson late next week.

Amazingly, surgeons have left most of the defunct kidneys inside Blair, taking out only one — his mother's — to make room for Jeff's.

"Actually, in the vast majority of transplants, we leave the old kidneys in if we can," said Dr. Kristin Mekeel, transplant surgeon at the Mayo Clinic.

"Removing the native kidney is a much bigger operation, with a much longer recovery. In some cases, you have to do it — with cancer or recurrent kidney infection. But otherwise you don't.

"And yes, four kidneys do fit in there. The newer ones are placed in the front of the abdomen, and hooked up to blood vessels in the leg. Everything fits rather nicely." Within days, Blair felt the difference.

"It is so awesome to be off dialysis. That is no fun at all — I was really going downhill," he said. "In the first week, my skin turned pink again. On dialysis, you're always sort of gray. The headaches are gone, the blood pressure is normal.

"I just really started to come back alive so quickly. This one has been so good, so far. I think they know how grateful I am."

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