

# Winning the Lottery

A Personal Essay about an Organ Transplant

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When I first met Javier, it was not obvious that he desperately needed a kidney transplant. He seemed very happy and outgoing at first, but as I got to know him a bit more it became very clear that he had some serious problems.

Javier was born in 1977 with one functioning kidney and an undiagnosed case of Focal glomerulonephritis, which is a blood disease that degenerates the filters in one's kidney. When Javier was 20, he had a sudden stroke and was hospitalized when they diagnosed him with the condition and explained he had about 25% kidney function. He was told that his kidney would probably only continue to function for 5 more years. In November of 2013, Javier was taken to an Intensive Care Unit after an internal GI bleed at work. His kidney function was only 12%, and it took 15 blood transfusions to keep him alive. The transplant list at Loma Linda University Hospital had a 9-12 year waiting list, and Javier was already well past his 5-year expectancy. When Javier met my aunt Erinn in 2014, his family was already on the process of being tested.

The process of testing for kidney donors is extensive. As Erinn described it, there are "Twenty plus tests including cancer screenings, mental health exams, all kinds of blood tests, even MRI's". Javier's brother and two of his cousins would be tested first, however all would prove incompatible for one reason or another. Erinn and Javier were married on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015 amidst a desperate search for a kidney donor. They moved out to New Mexico shortly after to be closer to the family. This was when I really began to be close to my new uncle.

Through golfing lessons, and many trips to Starbucks Javier and I became close. He is a loving and genuine role model who has taught and still teaches me the value of patience and friendships. Everywhere he goes, Javier knows someone of influence – celebrities, restaurant

owners, and the like. He is truly the most patient and gracious person I know. My favorite memory has to be when I arrived to play at his self-organized Celebrity Charity Golf Tournament and he introduced me to Al Geiberger, one of his professional acquaintances that I would end up golfing with the whole day. Not to be lost to time are Javier's own golfing lessons, where we would unwind and just have a good time together. However, these times always ended with a trip back to Starbucks for his infamous green tea, a solemn reminder of his fragile health and need for a transplant.

In 2016, Erinn decided to get tested to see if she was able to donate a kidney. For her, the choice was obvious. From the beginning of their relationship his kidney condition was "not a deciding factor" but after their marriage "he was getting sicker and sicker and that was terrifying". While she was going through the testing process, Javier's kidney function dropped again, and his doctor recommended he start Peritoneal Dialysis soon. Receiving this news was sickening, but shortly after the doctor's recommendation Erinn was notified that she was a viable kidney donor for Javier. The last step of the process was for the hospital to send the case information to a board of independent doctors to either approve or deny the surgery. The board approved the transplant and the surgery was scheduled for October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

The strangest part of the whole transplant process was learning that not only was Erinn an acceptable donor, but that they were a 6/6 match. That means the kidney to be donated matched Javier's body in the 6 areas that doctors check for when evaluating possible donors. For perspective, if you are 100,000<sup>th</sup> on the transplant list and a 6/6 donor is found for you, you are moved to the top immediately. Javier's doctor described the situation as "as rare as winning the

lottery”. In fact, the 6/6 match is so rare because even your own parents, genetically related to you, can be a 3/6 match at best. Identical twins and siblings are often the most common 6/6 matches. For Erinn to be Javier’s 6/6 match was mind blowing and confidence-giving. According to doctors, the 6/6 kidney also lasts longer and requires less anti-rejection medication (post-surgery) because the kidney is more similar to its new environment.

The trials, however, were not over yet. Two weeks before the scheduled surgery, Javier’s kidney function was so low that his blood became toxic, he could barely eat anything without throwing it up, and he was completely bedridden. It also took a toll on his mental health, he said “I was in despair, and very scared”. It wasn’t the end of the road for him though. On October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017, lives were changed. Javier and Erinn had a successful kidney transplant, doctors said Javier’s new kidney function was 80% post-surgery. He could immediately “see and hear more clearly, ready to eat”. The surgeon was “very happy” with the outcome, and in addition to immediate energy boosts, Javier went from being on an extremely restrictive diet to being able to eat semi-normally again. He can eat more protein, phosphorus, sodium, and potassium.

For me individually, I feel at ease. Pre-surgery it was obvious how much of a struggle he had even making it through the day, and now Javier’s life is changed, when we hang out together to talk about life or go golfing there is no aura of pain and no need for Starbucks tea. Javier’s transplant has provided a lot of stability in both Javier and Erinn’s life but also my family’s life. Living about a mile apart, we are constantly together for dinner or a movie or a game night and its all possible because of the transplant. When I asked Erinn what the surgery did for her, she said “Its hard to describe everything that’s gone on, having a chance to be able to donate was

incredibly hard to believe then and now, we lucked out, that God blessed us like this". Javier's sentiment was similar, "I used to have to drink large amounts of caffeine to have enough energy to make it through the day, for my wife, a tremendous amount of gratitude, that she was willing to sacrifice that much, risk her life I guess right? To save mine". Javier's organ transplant has forever changed my life and I'm so grateful that there is the technology to do so.