

Debbie's Story

It was the spring of 2010 and Debbie hadn't been feeling well for several weeks. One evening after returning from her job at an Ottawa-area engineering firm, she started throwing up blood and her stools were black. She ended up being rushed to the hospital. After days and weeks of follow-up – blood tests, ultrasounds, MRIs – she was finally diagnosed with non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH – the most severe form of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease).

By the end of April 2011, Debbie's condition had worsened. By this point she wasn't able to work or to drive safely. She was suffering episodes of confusion because of the toxins building up her body and affecting her brain (a condition known as hepatic encephalopathy). She was taking large doses of lactulose to help rid her body of the toxins but her family determined she could no longer live alone.

Debbie's liver specialist made arrangements for her to see the Liver Transplant Team at Toronto General Hospital. Her first appointment was booked for June 2011. In the meantime, with the help of friends and family, she packed up her belongings and moved in with her 75 year old mother.

Debbie relied on her sister Cindy to drive her to all her appointments in Toronto so she could be assessed to determine if she could be put on the liver transplant list. By the end of November 2011, she was placed on the transplant waiting list and given a pager. She was told it could take up to seven years for a deceased donor organ so her best option would be to try and find a matching live donor. Despite her reluctance to approach her family, she finally brought the subject up in December. She told them that she did not want them to feel obligated but by January her youngest brother David had undergone all the tests and was determined to be a match.

Before David could be Debbie's donor however, he had to lose weight because a liver biopsy had shown his liver had too much fat. Over the next three months, he followed a strict liquid based diet, lost 40 lbs and reduced the fat in his liver to zero.

Meanwhile, Debbie's condition was deteriorating. She was rushed to the hospital by ambulance several times and her family worried that the liver transplant wouldn't come soon enough.

After repeated biopsies, doctors determined that David's liver was ready for the transplant. The surgery was booked, then cancelled, then booked again adding more stress for Debbie, David and their family. On April 18 however, everything was good to go.



Debbie (right) and her sister Cindy at the 2015 Ottawa Stroll for Liver

Debbie received 2/3 of David's liver. When surgeons removed her diseased liver it was a solid mass of scar tissue. Both surgeries went well and David was discharged only a few days later. Debbie left the hospital one week after her transplant. She spent the first month living close to the hospital for follow-up appointments but then she was able to return to her mother's home near Ottawa.

Her recovery had its ups and downs. Debbie had to return to Toronto twice that summer to have her bile ducts stretched to allow for better bile flow and to eliminate the severe itching she was suffering.



Debbie and her brother David after the liver transplant surgery.

Only two months after her transplant, Debbie amazed her family and friends by organizing a team for the Canadian Liver Foundation's Stroll for Liver event in Ottawa. She raised \$2,000 in only one week and participated in the Stroll with her sister, niece and two friends. She met many other transplant recipients and was able to share experiences with others who had been through the same situation.

Today, Debbie is working full time, lives in her own condo and is feeling better than ever. She is incredibly grateful to everyone – medical staff, family, friends and others – who supported her throughout her transplant experience. Having been taken by surprise by her liver disease diagnosis, she is committed to raising awareness and helping to raise funds for liver research so others will not have to go through what she did.