

Kidney Disease Can Strike Even the Strongest

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Anyone who watches Jeff Jackson push and haul huge garbage dumpsters on his overnight shift picking up trash from Seattle's businesses would see a fit guy who works hard. Jackson, 45, spends five nights a week hauling the trash of about 3,800 commercial customers in downtown Seattle, Magnolia, the University District and Lake City. He's at work from 7 p.m. to 6 a.m.

What most people don't know about Jackson, however, is that he spends his days off hooked to a dialysis machine. For 16 years the West Seattle resident has lived with kidney failure. His kidneys can no longer clean the waste from his bloodstream. He relies on machines to do that for him. Four hours and 15 minutes each time. Three days a week. After his dialysis treatments at Northwest Kidney Centers' Haviland Kidney Center on Capitol Hill, Jackson grabs a bite to eat and goes home to sleep.

There really isn't much time for anything else.

"This is not a way of life for anyone to live," he said while receiving dialysis recently. "But if you saw me, you would never know."

Like many others diagnosed with advanced kidney disease where there is very little kidney function remaining, Jackson had no idea he was so sick when he was diagnosed. At age 29 he was going through a stressful divorce. To ease the stress and the pain, he relied heavily on ibuprofen. He believes he abused the over-the-counter painkiller to the point that it destroyed his kidneys. For three years he dealt with the divorce proceedings. During that time he suffered headaches and had trouble seeing. He felt exhausted. He eventually got to the point where he couldn't keep food down.

Despite warnings from his mother that he needed to see a doctor, he procrastinated. He was a strong, 6-foot-1, 245-pound guy who was so good at football, basketball and baseball in high school that he could have played in college. He told himself he couldn't be sick.

But one day, after an exhausting trip to Disneyland, he was driving to Edmonds when he passed a drive-in health clinic. He stopped in for a checkup. His blood pressure was so high that the doctors at the clinic ordered him to go to the hospital immediately. Once there, he was admitted for two days. His diagnosis – kidney failure.

“I had no clue what dialysis was,” he recalled. “My kidneys had shut down.”

Sixteen years later Jackson is not bitter. But he wishes he had done things differently.

“If I would have proceeded to do what my mom asked me to do, I wouldn’t be sitting in this chair now talking to you,” he said. “I should have gone to the doctor to get checked out. For my neglect and my selfishness I’m where I’m at.”

Jackson has chosen not to add his name to the kidney transplant waiting list and he doesn’t want to ask his 19-year-old daughter Chase for one of her kidneys. Instead, he wants to work hard to see her through college so she can support herself well into the future. He pushed Chase to get a good education at Holy Names Academy and is proud of her entering Seattle University this year as a freshman.

“No one’s guaranteed anything,” said Jackson. “I want to know the day that I do check out – whether it’s my decision or I get into an accident, I want to know that I’ve given her the best that she can have so she never has to look back or worry about anything.”

Jackson is convinced that if he had seen a doctor earlier he would not be in this situation today.

“I’m not mad at anyone. I look at the mirror everyday and I don’t blame anybody,” says Jackson. “It is what it is. I think that by the grace of God I’m able to work. There will come a time when I won’t be able to.”

In the short amount of spare time that Jackson has – when he’s not working, not on dialysis, and not recovering – he likes to spend quiet time reading, taking walks, eating out with friends or just watching the raindrops.

“You got to stay positive,” he says. “You can’t have a lot of drama in your life. You can’t be mad one minute and sad the next. I’m the same person. Nothing has changed except I have to come here to get my blood cleaned in order for me to survive.”

Jackson’s story is not uncommon, as one in seven people have kidney disease and don’t even know it. In an effort to bring awareness of this disease to the community, The Northwest Kidney Centers is sponsoring Kidney Health Fest for African American Families on May 2 at the African American Academy in Seattle. It’s a time when the community is invited to enjoy free entertainment, food, and participate in free kidney health screenings, and Jackson has a bit of advice for anyone who is willing to listen – whether or not they plan to attend the community event.

“Don’t be afraid – if you have any kind of symptoms from headaches to nauseousness that continue for more than two weeks – to immediately go see somebody,” he says.

About Kidney Health Fest for African American Families:

Northwest Kidney Centers on Saturday May 2, 2009, will hold its 7th annual Kidney Health Fest for African American Families. The free event runs from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the African American Academy, 8311 Beacon Ave. S., in Seattle. It features free health screenings and healthy food samples made by local celebrity chefs. Participants also will enjoy a panel discussion on kidney health and healthy living on a shoestring, with Jesse Jones of KING 5 television as the emcee. The day includes entertainment, music, exhibits, a fitness demonstration and obstacle course for all ages, a fun, interactive Kids' Korner, and the chance to win prize drawings for iPods and an Xbox 360. For more information about the event and Northwest Kidney Centers go to www.nwkidney.org.

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