

STORIES OF HOPE

NEW KIDNEY, NEW PURPOSE

By the time James Miyagishima acted on his mounting health problems in 2004, his doctor suspected his type 2 diabetes had gone undiagnosed and unmanaged for about 20 years. It was too late for the toes on his right foot, for some of his vision, and for his kidneys.

"If I had been under a doctor's care, none of this would ever have happened," Miyagishima says.

Thanks to a kidney transplant, Miyagishima received a second chance to guard his health and to warn others about the life-threatening effects of type 2 diabetes.

"I don't want anyone to go through what I've gone through," he says.

Miyagishima knew he was overweight, but just 20 pounds more than the 220 he carried as an artillery officer during 15 years of regular exercise in the U.S. Army. He had excessive thirst, drinking up to two gallons of tea a day, and frequent urination. After a physical, the Army Reserve had turned him down back in February of 1996.

"That was the first time I was told that I had a lot of glucose in my urine," he recalls. "They never called it diabetes. Nobody sat me down and explained it to me. Now I understand the significance. That sugar was just destroying my organs."

The next sign of trouble was occasional blurred vision. Denial helped him explain away the problem.

"There are lots of little warnings, but you let them go. Diabetes allows you to go on with life," while it secretly attacks your body, Miyagishima warns.

Then he noticed a change in his right eye. A master optician who ran his own optical store in Alamogordo, N.M., Miyagishima suspected premature cataracts and diabetic retinopathy. An ophthalmologist, who found bleeding in the eye, confirmed his diagnosis and urged him to see a physician.

"When I started losing sight, that was enough," he says. "It was a little late. I waited too long.

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His physician then gave him "the bad news on what was going to happen in the near future." High blood glucose had caused the damage to his eyes and had badly damaged his kidneys.

He started peritoneal dialysis, to remove toxins in his blood, in February 2006. Soon an infected toe required drastic action. Rather than risk losing his right foot or leg, he agreed to have one toe amputated in May, then the remaining four in August.

Poor health forced Miyagishima to close his store of 20 years and move in with his parents in Las Cruces, N.M., in November 2008. "I lost pretty much everything," he says. Due to impaired vision, he gave up his driver's license, relying on public transportation and rides from his 81-year-old father.

After three years of three weekly, four-hour hemodialysis treatments and three years on the transplant waiting list, Miyagishima received a new kidney in May 2009.

Today, Miyagishima treats his body as a temple with a very important guest. He is 30 pounds lighter, follows a disciplined diet, checks his blood glucose five times a day, and keeps his average blood glucose in the range of a person who does not have diabetes.

"I'm taking good care of the kidney," Miyagishima says. "This was a gift, and I treat it as one. Every day I give thanks to God and my donor, who passed away but gave me the gift of life."

Still on crutches because of an ulcer under the ball of his right foot, Miyagishima looks for every opportunity to alert others to the dangers of type 2 diabetes. To see his three videos, go to YouTube.com and search for "MrMiyagi13."

"I've gone through a lot. It's been a challenge," Miyagishima says. It could have been avoided, so he offers himself as a lesson to those with subtle symptoms. "If I'd just heeded all the warnings. That's why it's so important now for me to tell my story." ▲



James Miyagishima with his youngest daughter, Kaitland Kazuko

