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Two wheels, dialysis and determination

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Aloha man to take three-day cycle tour for kidney disease awareness

Ray Hennings has about three and a half years before he's likely to find a matching kidney for a transplant. In the meantime, he undergoes kidney dialysis three days a week for four hours each session.

His recipe for maintaining a positive attitude? Two wheels, two legs, a generous helping of peaks and valleys, and a bottomless bucket of determination.

"Cycling helps me maintain that," he says of his glass half-full outlook. "It's something to build on. Whenever I have an event to look forward to, it's kept me kind of goal-oriented, which helps. I don't want to be in the other situation, where I feel the world's been pissing on me. There's not much you can do from that situation.

"My focus is really what I can do today."

Most days, the Aloha resident is training like mad for a three-day, 220-mile bike ride in South Carolina to raise awareness for kidney disease. The seventh annual Tour DaVita begins on Sunday in the north-central South Carolina town of Gaffney and heads in a southwestern route toward Clemson, near the Georgia border.

Sponsored by DaVita, a Fortune 500 company that provides dialysis services and education for patients with chronic kidney failure, the ride will benefit the Kidney TRUST, a nonprofit organization that provides no-cost kidney screening to the general public in non-medical settings. While most riders are DaVita employees, nephrologists and nurses, Hennings will be one of six kidney dialysis patients making the trek.

A road bicyclist for 25 years, Hennings has been training this summer and spring with mostly 25- to 60-mile rides, some as long as 100 miles, in the Chehalem Mountain foothills that rise just a few miles northwest of the house he shares with Lori, his wife of 30 years.

Hennings, who's participated in the 200-mile Cycle Oregon ride for 19 years, has logged more than 3,500 miles so far this year.

"It's probably more training than I need to do," he admits, noting the difference between the Northwestern topography and that of the race course. "The training I do here is more challenging than what I'm going to see on the trip."

It may be a challenge, but the rewards are worth it to Hennings, a Massachusetts native who first moved to Oregon in 1965.

"It's the carrot and stick," he says. "I get out and get exercise. I personally want to complete this ride. I want to enjoy it and have fun. I'm in a unique position as a rider on dialysis. I want to get the word out that dialysis isn't a death sentence. You can put together a pretty good life, even with dialysis."

Taking control

Hennings, 59, has known since his mid-20s that his kidneys were on borrowed time. Like his mother, sister and cousin, Ray has polycystic kidney disease, a genetic-based kidney disorder in which numerous cysts form in the kidneys, causing the organs to become enlarged. About a year ago, his kidney function dipped below 18 percent, and Hennings has been on dialysis ever since.

He's on a list at Oregon Health and Science University Hospital for a kidney transplant, but knows it could be two or three years before his name rises to the top. Meanwhile, it's three trips a week to the DaVita Hillsboro Dialysis Center to have the machine remove toxins from his blood and kidneys, which now weigh around 10 pounds each.

While dialysis produces abrupt changes in the body's chemistry, with symptoms including fatigue, depression, anxiety and mental confusion, Hennings has avoided some of the more dire side effects such as diabetes and hypertension.

"Except for the dialysis, I feel pretty healthy," he says. "Physical fitness gives me something I have control over in my life. I don't have control over the disease. I don't have control over when I get a transplant. I do have control over what happens in my day-to-day life, my physical fitness, how I view the world."

“It helps a lot. I don’t feel as much a victim when I have that control.”

For the big three-day ride, Hennings will be accompanied by his longtime friend, Tom Rasmussen, a Hartford, Conn., resident. Along with their fellow riders, Hennings and Rasmussen will camp in tents, which a courtesy driver will transport with their other gear from one site to the next. The riders will trek 60 miles on days one and three, with a 100-mile goal on the second day.

The course will include stops for rest, water and lunch, with course mechanics and medical personnel on hand for those who need assistance at any point.

Hennings, who plans to fly to Greenville, S.C., on Friday, is prepared for the challenge — his first multi-day bike tour since starting dialysis.

“I’m ready,” he says. “I tend to focus on one day at a time. If I worry about the future, I’m not really productive. If I plan for the future, that’s a present-time activity.”

The right direction

When he returns home, Hennings, who left a long career in information technology with IBM and Weyerhaeuser, plans to complete his master’s degree in geographic information systems at Portland State University. He’d like to find work as a conservation GIS technician.

“I’ve always been a map head,” he admits. “In some ways, I don’t know why I didn’t do this 30 years ago, but I’m glad I’m doing it now.”

Hennings is hopeful his dedication to the bike odyssey will encourage others, particularly those on dialysis, to step up their physical fitness routine or even take up cycling.

“I’m kind of hoping that anybody who reads this article who is on dialysis, if I can inspire them to get off the couch and ride,” he says, “that’s a good thing.”

For more information or to donate to the Kidney Trust, visit tourdavita.org.

