

'She has a chance for a new start'

TRANSPLANT LIST | Sister's gift of a kidney ends ailing nurse's long wait

July 31, 2008

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Keha Ireland was playing it cool minutes before the start of a long-awaited kidney transplant operation Wednesday at Rush University Medical Center.

While she smiled and laughed with family and friends in her hospital room, she said she was all "butterflies" inside.

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Keha Ireland, who has lupus, was on the transplant list for 14 months before her sister donated a kidney. They had surgery Wednesday.

(John J. Kim/Sun-Times)

"I'm a good faker," she said. "I don't want everybody else to be nervous."

She was nervous not only for her own surgery but because her sister Paula Short, 36, also was going under the knife. Short had one of her kidneys removed at Rush University Medical Center on Wednesday to donate to Ireland. Wednesday evening, a family friend and hospital spokeswoman said the surgeries went well and both women were recovering.

Before the surgery, Ireland said that beyond her nerves, she was thrilled and grateful for the opportunity to reclaim her old life, to go back to work as a nurse, to pick up her 2-year-old baby, to bowl another strike or spare.

Ireland, 35, was one of more than 4,700 people in Illinois waiting for a potentially life-saving organ transplant. Her story, along with those of five others waiting for organ transplants, was featured in a series of Sun-Times articles that started in April about life on the organ transplant waiting list.

Her kidney failure is a complication from the chronic disease lupus. She was on the organ waiting list for 14 months.

During that time, she was on dialysis three times a week. She had to leave a job she loved, working as a triage nurse at an Elmhurst clinic. And she couldn't lift her youngest daughter, now 2, a child whose first gesture to her was waving goodbye because Ireland was always leaving for medical treatment.

"I felt hopeless and helpless, like nothing would happen," Clifton Underwood, Ireland's father, said about watching his once-active daughter diminish. "I told her to hang in there, and finally her sister came through."

Ireland's father, her husband, Kenneth, and other family and friends spent Wednesday in a hospital waiting room charting the progress of patient 37455, Short, and patient 37456, Ireland. Ireland's four children and Short's two kids are being watched by another sister while they're in the hospital.

Veronica Edwards, Ireland's closest friend since the two were 11 years old, said she and Ireland had a little party while Ireland was at dialysis Monday for what she hoped would be her last appointment.

"I've been waiting for this day for a year," Edwards said. "She has a chance for a new start for herself."

The family spent Saturday celebrating the upcoming transplant at a Bolingbrook restaurant. Ireland said a pastor from a local church overheard the family talking about the operations and stopped to pray with them. It was a hopeful moment filled with optimism for the sisters' surgeries and the healthy days they're hoping are ahead.

"I'm just happy that it's finally here," Ireland said. "I thank her with everything I can think of for doing this for me."