

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

'It's been a long 13 years'

STEVE TURNER | 13 | KIDNEY | Waiting one year

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By the time his mother discovered he wasn't taking his medication, Steve Turner's first transplanted kidney already was failing.

Steve was 8 when his mom, Chante Lewis, gave him one of her kidneys in 2003.

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Steve Turner, shown with his mother, Chante Lewis, has been on kidney dialysis for a year.
(Jean Lachat/Sun-Times)

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The doctors warned Lewis that, as a teenager, it was likely Steve would resist having to constantly remember to take the immune-suppressing drugs that keep transplant recipients from rejecting a donated organ.

But it started earlier than she expected, when Steve was 11.

"I was finding pills behind the toilet, under his pillow and under his bed," she said.

Steve's explanation: "I thought I was fine, and I just stopped," he said.

Now, the soft-spoken 13-year-old needs a second transplant.

The closest family member who would be a match is Steve's father, Shaun Thomas. But he's locked up in a Wisconsin prison. And it would cost \$5,000 to \$7,000 to get a guard to accompany Thomas while he'd be in Chicago for the transplant -- a prison requirement. Lewis is working with the prison on a temporary release. In the meantime, she said, "We're just waiting."

Steve has been on kidney dialysis for a year. Three times a week, he goes to the hospital at 6 a.m. for 3½ hours of dialysis.

Then, he goes to school or home. But keeping up with his classes at Beasley Elementary has been hard because he ends up missing so much school.

"He tries hard, but it's an uphill struggle," said his grandmother, Sharon Lewis. "It hurts his self-esteem."

What hurts even more, said Steve, are the things he's had to give up -- football, Flamin' Hot Cheetos and riding the roller coasters at Great America.

"I just sit around all day," he said. "I can't barely do nothing because they're afraid I might pass out or something."

Looking at her son, Chante Lewis said: "Steve has been an inspiration to me. He's always been a champ. The only time he's angry is when he's going to the hospital."

But Lewis shows the strain of a parent who's watched her son battle infections, high blood pressure and other medical problems for most of his life, even as she juggles caring for him with her full-time job as a nurse and raising two younger children.

"It's been a long 13 years," she said.

But everything her family has been through will be worth it, she said, once Steve has a normal life again.

He thinks about that normal life. And, once he gets it, he knows what he wants to do first. Grinning, Steve said, "I'm going to Disney World."

Monifa Thomas

How to become an organ donor

To join the Illinois Organ/Tissue Donor Registry, visit Lifegoeson.com or call (800) 210-2106 and put your name on the confidential list, which is only released to organ and tissue procurement personnel and medical examiners after all lifesaving efforts have failed.

Gift of Hope, an Elmhurst-based non-profit, also answers questions about organ donation and gives information on how to become an organ donor at Giftofhope.org