

82nd paratrooper gives gift of life to sister

by Spc. Jim Wilt

82nd Abn. Div. PAO

People say it time and again, "they would give the shirts off their backs for family," but one 82nd Airborne Division paratrooper gave more than just her shirt.

First Lt. Jamie Hovis, 3rd Brigade Support Battalion communications officer, donated one of her kidneys to her sister who is suffering from lupus.

"It didn't really hit me until after the surgery, the first time I got to go see my sister, just seeing the look on her face ... she was so thankful. It was very humbling to me, because I was like wow, I couldn't believe I could do so much for one person, especially my sister, she had been sick for so long," said Jamie, a 24-year-old native of Rolla, Mo.

Jamie's sister, Jackie, now 26, was diagnosed with lupus during Jamie's senior year of high school. Jackie was 22-years-old at the time.

According to the Lupus Foundation of America, "lupus is a chronic inflammatory disease that can affect various parts of the body, especially the skin, joints, blood and kidneys."

For most people, lupus is a mild disease affecting only a few organs. For others, it may cause serious and even life-threatening problems, according to the foundation.

Jackie fell into the second category of those affected by lupus. The disease was attacking her kidneys and slowly taking the life from her.

Four years ago, Jackie said the lupus hit her like a "bang, all at once."

"One day I was in bed and couldn't move at all," she said.

A year after the initial onset of the disease, Jackie said her kidneys began to fail.

Jamie said her sister's kidneys were functioning at less than 10 percent of their capacity. Jackie was in and out of the hospital and intensive care since the onset of her illness and she was also receiving

chemotherapy.

According to the University of Maryland Medical Center, "When a patient loses 90 to 95 percent of his or her kidney function, life-saving treatment becomes necessary. This treatment can be either dialysis (removal of wastes from the blood by an artificial kidney machine) or a kidney transplant."

With lupus ravaging her sister's body, the risk of a donation was too high, Jamie said.

The possibility of Jackie's death while on the operating table was a key factor which prevented the doctors from allowing a transplant, Jamie said.

Also, she added, if a transplant was conducted while her lupus was not in remission, it could instantly destroy the new kidney.

"Last year, they finally said that if she found a match and if her lupus stayed inactive that she could have a transplant," Jamie said.

"They said if I didn't get the surgery, I wouldn't be here today," Jackie said.

Jamie said she worked with her battalion commander and executive officer to receive approval for the surgery. She also said her brigade surgeon and her physician's assistant gave her all the necessary information she needed before she went into surgery.

After contacting the surgeon general's office, she submitted all the necessary paperwork to be approved for the surgery.

"The surgeon, along with the (physician's assistant) and my (battalion commander) made sure I knew exactly what I was getting into and how this could possible affect my future," she said.

"It wasn't a question of whether I was going to do it; it was just (a question of) when I was going to be able to do it and if I was going to be a match or not," she said.

A donor's organs need to match their recipient's blood type and the recipient's cells must also accept the donor's cells according to UMMC.

A human leukocyte antigen tissue typing test, shows how well you match with the recipient. Your blood cells are mixed with the serum of the recipient in a 'crossmatch' test to see if that serum 'kills off' your cells. If cells are killed, it means that the immune system of the recipient would reject your kidney, according to UMMC's Web site.

Jamie said she went through all of the testing necessary to see if she was an eligible donor and said she was an "almost perfect match."

"I really didn't want her to give me the kidney," Jackie said.

She didn't want anything bad to happen to her sister, but, Jamie won out in the end. The surgery took place Aug. 29 in St. Louis. Their parents uneasily awaited the results.

"They were really nervous at first because they already had one sick daughter and there is always risk involved in every operation," Jamie said. "They were really excited that I was doing it because my sister had been sick for so long but they were nervous too. They were just ecstatic after we both woke up from the surgery and everything was going so well."

"My sister hasn't had any complications ... They said that my kidney started working for her immediately," Jamie said.

According to Jackie, her long-term prognosis is good and the doctors said that the new kidney probably added at least 20 years to her life.

"They think this kidney transplant will put the lupus in remission," Jackie said.

Following 30 days of convalescence leave, Jamie returned to duty.

"I've been healing really (well,) she said. "They even let me start working-out earlier than I was

supposed to."

"At first it was really hard right after the surgery because they cut all of the core muscles on my left side," Jamie said. "I was a little scared the first couple of days because I was having trouble moving my left leg."

"Every day I get more energy back," she said.

Jamie can currently run for 30 minutes and has been lifting weights but that pales in comparison to the marathon she ran shortly before the surgery.

Being short one kidney isn't going to slow her down Jamie said. She said she is already planning to run another marathon and she has also decided to continue parachuting out of aircrafts (despite her surgeon's warnings) and deploying to Iraq.

"I don't get to jump before I leave (for Iraq) but I definitely plan on it as soon as I get back," she said.

"I'm not going to go around chasing jumps, but I'm a leader in the 82nd," she said. "I don't want to ask my troops to do something I wouldn't."

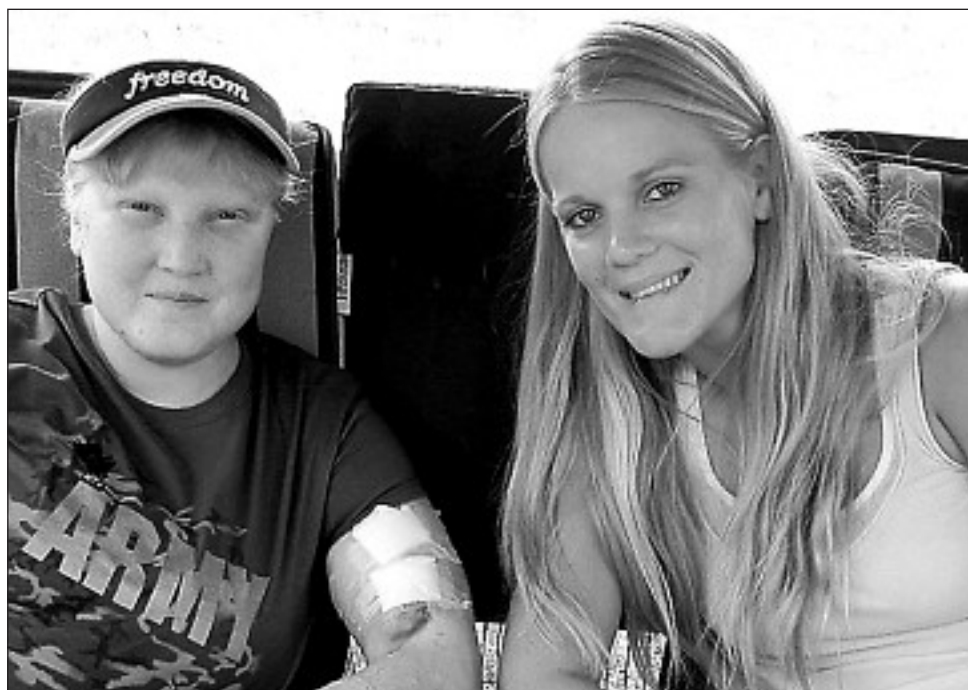


photo courtesy of 1st Lt. Jamie Hovis

Jackie Hovis, left, received a kidney from her sister, 1st Lt. Jamie Hovis, 3rd Brigade Support Battalion, 82nd Airborne Division, in St. Louis Aug. 29.

The surgery has changed Jackie's life.

"I've been doing things I wanted to do in life," Jackie explained. "You have to keep on going in life and follow your dreams."

Despite all Jackie went through, she never lost her focus on what she wanted.

"I wasn't going to give up like some people do. You can't give up on life no matter what," she said.

Jackie now has plans to finish her college degree which she worked on in between her bout with lupus.

"Seeing my sister being able to do what normal kids our age do is just amazing and to think that I was part of it makes (me) feel really good," Jamie said.

Jackie is very thankful for what her sister did. She is also thankful of the Army.

"My sister, when she gave me the kidney...was the best thing anybody could ever do for me," she said.

"I thank the Army for letting her do it," she added. She said she also appreciates everything that Soldiers do everyday.

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