

# The Gift of Life

## USW Member Donates Kidney to Union Brother

When USW member Mike Sumner needed a kidney transplant to save his life, a longtime co-worker came to his rescue, giving new meaning to the phrase union brother and sister.

Sumner and his kidney donor, Janice Webber, are both members of USW Local 42 at Cascade Tissues Group in Eau Claire, Wis. They have worked together for 25 years.

"I don't know how you repay someone for something like this," said Sumner, 59, who is back at work and feeling good after recuperation.

Modest about gift

Webber, though, is modest about her contribution and bewildered over why anyone would think she is special for giving up a kidney to a man she only knew through work.

"When I heard Mike needed one, I said I'd give him one," Webber told a news reporter. "I told him I wouldn't let him die. I don't understand why anyone wouldn't do the same."

Sumner, a lifelong resident of Eau Claire, had known for some time that he had Polycystic Kidney Disease (PKD). His mother had the same disease and an MRI confirmed his diagnosis.

PKD is a genetic disorder characterized by the growth of numerous cysts in the kidneys, the organs primarily responsible for cleaning blood. Fluid-filled cysts can slowly replace much of the mass of the kidneys, reducing function and leading to failure.

When PKD causes kidneys to fail – which can happen after many years – the patient requires dialysis or kidney transplantation to avoid end-stage renal disease.

Sumner and his wife, Sue McCrackin Sumner, eventually decided that a transplant was the best option.

Janice Webber, left, visits with Mike Sumner to whom she donated a kidney. Webber and Sumner are both members of USW Local 42.

Dialysis had certain side effects but might be necessary if a transplant were not available.

They came to the decision by reviewing information provided by physicians at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., and simply thinking through those choices the best they could.

"You don't wonder why it has to be," Sue Sumner said. "You just weigh each step as carefully as you can."

Mike had to meet extensive criteria to qualify for a transplant and underwent three days of testing at the clinic before a board of review authorized him to be placed on a donor wait-list. The anticipated wait was initially five years.

Family tested

Family members were tested for blood type and antibody acceptance. One of Sumner's three daughters, Kim, had the same blood type as her father but was unacceptable as a donor because she has also been diagnosed with PKD.

Sumner's blood type is O, a universal type that can be transfused to patients with other blood types. But patients with Type O blood can only receive Type O blood.

After he was on the list for a year and a half, Sumner's kidneys began to show signs of failure. That meant waiting for another 3 1/2 years on the transplant list was no longer an option.

With dialysis looming, Janice Webber stepped forward to volunteer. She had the correct blood type, O, but needed to go through three days of tests to discover if other criteria were acceptable. She turned out to be an acceptable match.

The operation went off without complications last September. Webber had a two-day hospital stay and several weeks of recovery at home before returning to work.

For Sumner the hospital stay was a bit longer and more grueling. But subsequent check ups show his second chance at life has taken hold. "It's great," he said.

### Searching for a donor

Bobby Tucker, a USW member retired from the Uniroyal-Goodrich plant in Opelika, Ala., has failing kidneys and is searching for a donor kidney to save his life. The Lanett, Ala., resident and associate Baptist minister, has type A blood and may receive a kidney from someone with either types A or O. To help, contact Michelle Dennis, living donor coordinator at the UAB Health System in Birmingham, at 1-888-822-7892.

In the midst of the tension and emotions that every strike evokes, the members of nine USW local unions in Kentucky and West Virginia showed what it means to be union brothers and sisters.

The 2,700 USW members employed by nine Appalachian Regional Healthcare (ARH) hospitals supported each other during a 25-day work stoppage in ways that were downright extraordinary.

They stood up to freezing rain and hurricane force winds on the picket lines and held their heads high in the face of attack ads the hospital placed in local newspapers and radio stations.

Positive support

The 18 presidents and vice presidents on the negotiating committee appreciated positive support. They faced the pressure of trying to quickly secure a fair tentative agreement for certified nursing aides, licensed practical nurses, housekeepers, maintenance and clerical workers whose average wage was \$12 an hour.

The most extraordinary illustration of fraternity was made late on April 21, the day negotiators reached a tentative agreement. That morning the only remaining major conflict was over the defined benefit pension.

ARH offered to add a dollar to the pension multiplier for all 2,700 employees over the three-year contract. This seemed to be generous since some companies offer only pennies and non-union employers routinely eliminate pensions.

String attached

But, of course, there was a mighty big string attached. In exchange, ARH wanted to eliminate defined benefit pension benefits for all new employees. They would get instead what is essentially a savings plan, called a 403(b).

All along, the bargaining committee had told ARH to forget the 403(b). The members knew the International union opposes giving up the protection of a defined pension plan for any worker. But more than that, the committee wasn't willing to do it.

Photos by Eric Slusher



# Solidarity Prevails!

## Workers Stick Together to Beat Appalachian Hospital Chain

They talked about it. Roger McGinnis, president of the Harlan local, noted that some younger members liked the idea of savings plans because they are portable.

But even if half a million dollars were accumulated in such an account over a lifetime, how long would it last in retirement? What if the worker spent it unwisely?

With defined benefit pension plans, the checks continue to arrive as long as the worker lives. The bargaining committee wanted younger workers to be protected and continued to reject the 403(b).

Finally, on the evening of April 21, ARH made the painful choice. The healthcare non-profit agreed to eliminate the 403(b) and permit new employees into the defined benefit pension plan, but only if the \$1 additional multiplier was removed.

ARH said it was its last, best and final offer and wanted a ratification vote,

with the committee recommending approval if the 403(b) were to remain out.

This was the real test. The bargaining committee didn't hesitate, however, to sacrifice a little bit now to protect future generations of workers.

Still, the committee wanted a few more concessions before it would accept a last and final offer and sent the federal mediators back to ARH with requests.

It was over

The mediators returned with an offer for return-to-work language, and the bargaining committee began celebrating. It was over. They could recommend the tentative agreement.

In meetings over the next few days, committee members described an agreement in which health insurance premium increases were limited and co-payments were eliminated altogether if employees used ARH facilities. There are bi-annual raises in each of three years, and workers will not have to pay for other benefits.

