

SCOTT TYRA

By JAN HOGAN
VIEW STAFF WRITER

Scott Tyra is a nonsmoker who grew up in a household with two heavy smokers. He said he “felt sick since I can remember,” and at age 17, he had half of one of his lungs removed.

Now 59, he said the other half is so scarred it is useless, and his remaining lung is failing. In the spring of 2007, he had to be hospitalized due to fluid in his lungs. An oxygen bottle feeds air to him through a nasal cannula as he waits for a transplant.

He’s been on the double organ transplant list at UCLA since December 2007. Since then, he has received six calls with the magic words, “We have a set of lungs for you,” only to be disappointed.

“It’s always a surprise when they call,” said Tyra, a Summerlin resident. “The first time, I hyperventilated a little. Now, when I get a call, it’s not as nerve-wracking.”

Still, he said there is an undercurrent of an adrenaline rush at the news, followed the next day by a dip in his energy level.

The six calls have seen him receive a follow-up “never mind” call three times. Sometimes, he gets to Los Angeles International Airport when his cellphone rings to say it’s another false alarm.

He had his closest call yet in early September. He was on the operating table, and when they put him under, the donor’s lungs were on ice near enough to touch. He woke up groggy to a male nurse telling him that the operation had not taken place. The lungs had a spot of valley fever and could not be used. Valley fever is a fungal infection caused by coccidioides organisms.

Tyra is somewhat near the top of the transplant list, which is fluid and ever-changing. People are bumped ahead if their condition is more precarious and they need lungs sooner than him. The organ transplant system has Tyra and his wife, Jodi, going to UCLA every three months for checkups.

“I’ve learned to manage, never felt really frustrated or thought, ‘What a lousy hand I’ve been dealt,’ ” Tyra said. “In fact, every time I’m at UCLA, I’ll see someone who’s worse off than me, and I want to say, ‘Move me down the list. She needs it more than me.’ “

Dealing with portable oxygen 24/7 has become normal for him. At his job as a schedule analyst for Allegiant Air, he wheels the tank around with him. At home, he uses a nonportable system with a 50-foot hose.

“We don’t think much about it — well, except when we trip over the tube,” Jodi said.

The couple met at the University of Denver 35 years ago. That was back when Scott’s lungs were functioning better, and they enjoyed hiking and snow skiing.

They vow to resume those activities once Scott finally gets his transplant. There are other things on that list — golfing, softball, weekend outings and a vacation to New Zealand, where Scott went once using his airline pass.

“Instead of a bucket list, we have a, ‘When you get your new lungs’ list,” Jodi said.

The couple celebrated their 30th anniversary last year. They have one son, Ben, 28. Their decision to start a family was dependent on whether or not Scott’s condition was hereditary. They were relieved, they said, to learn it was not.

Now, both are advocates for the organ donor program, urging people to sign up when they renew their driver’s license.

For more information about becoming an organ donor, visit nvdonor.org.

Editor's note

As this story was going to press, View received an update that Scott had received a call from UCLA Medical Center telling him a pair of lungs was available. He underwent a double lung transplant on Dec. 30.

His wife, Jodi, said the surgery took seven hours and went well, and Scott was up and walking around 24 hours later.

"Scott was on the transplant list for 7 years, had 7 false alarms, and the surgery took 7 hours. Talk about lucky 7's! (sic)" she wrote.

After Scott recovers, she said they would probably go to Mount Charleston first to test out his new lungs in the higher altitude, "then on to the big mountains of Colorado!"

"We want to thank everyone for their support and please remember to register to become an organ donor," Jodi wrote.