

St. Clair Shores woman overcomes medical issues to help others

By: Kristyne E. Demske (/reporterbio/kristyne-e-demske) | **St. Clair Shores Sentinel**
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ST. CLAIR SHORES — In early 2018, Jeritha Brown was in renal failure, and dialysis couldn't even keep her kidneys cleaned properly.

She would experience heart palpitations where her heart rate would skyrocket and she'd have to be taken off dialysis. Every day was a struggle and it was hard to even get out of bed, let alone to take care of her five children, ages 4-17.

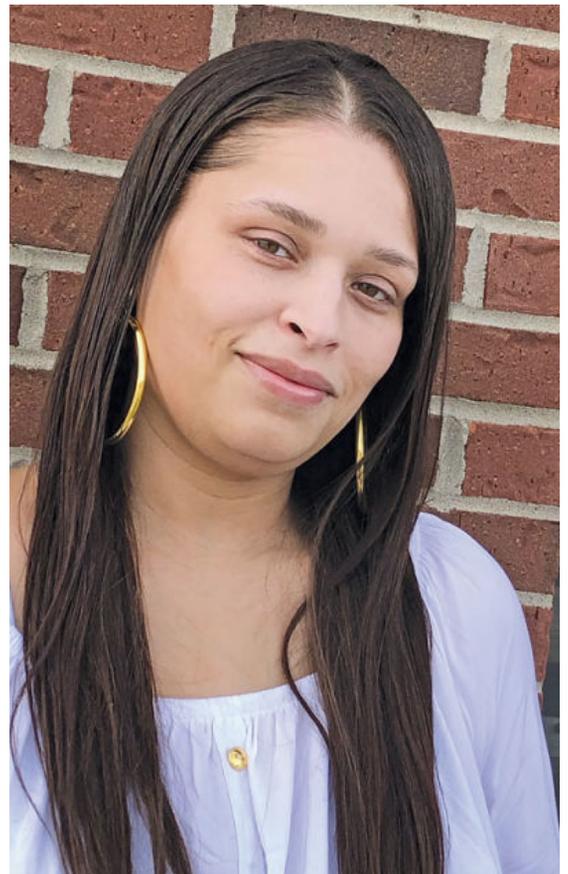
"My body is not taking to the dialysis like it used to. It's doing a number on my heart," she said in late January of 2018.

She was desperate to find a replacement kidney, but there was a seven-year waiting list in the state of Michigan. She reached out to C & G Newspapers and Facebook friends for help, searching for a donor who could be a match.

Her problems had begun with the birth of her fourth child. She experienced pre-eclampsia and, while the doctors assured her that everything would return to normal once her daughter was born, that didn't happen for Brown. That was 13 years ago.

Five years ago, she became pregnant with her fifth child. Against all medical advice, Brown went ahead with the pregnancy and birth, naming her daughter Amira because, to Brown, that's what she was. Unfortunately, during the pregnancy, Brown's kidneys began to fail, and when Amira was born — weighing just 1 pound, but breathing on her own — Brown had to begin dialysis.

While she says that the gift of her daughter was worth it, undergoing dialysis while caring for five children was a struggle. As Amira approached her fourth birthday in 2018, Brown said that her body just wasn't responding the way that it used to to the treatment.



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Jeritha Brown, of St. Clair Shores, is training to become a peer mentor for those with kidney disease.

Photo provided by Jeritha Brown

“It was a struggle. My heart stopped during treatment a couple times where I had to be resuscitated,” said Brown, who lives in St. Clair Shores. “My ribs were fractured. Not only did I have renal failure, but the renal failure also led to congestive heart failure.”

At one point, Brown was taking 20 medications per day. She was praying that she wouldn't have to wait seven years for a new kidney, because it was putting such a strain on not only her life, but the lives of her children as well. She didn't like feeling that her children were taking care of her, instead of her being the one who cared for them.

She would have to leave them for months at a time, as well, every time she was hospitalized.

“They (doctors) said, ‘We don't know what to do no more. It's hard to dialyze you. It's getting worse and worse.’ They were basically saying, ‘We don't know how much more they can do for you,’” she recalled.

Breaking point

She reached a breaking point on her son's birthday, Jan. 29 of 2018.

“I reached out to a friend of mine. I told her, ‘Can you share my story in hopes of finding a donor?’ I found myself sicker and sicker, weaker and weaker,” she said. “I contacted you all and, Feb. 3, I got the phone call.”

As she was getting ready to head to dialysis that day, Brown got the news that she had been waiting for — she was going to receive a donated kidney. Her donor had died at the age of 21.

But while that should have been the beginning of a new life for Brown, that wasn't the end of her story. Brown's body rejected the kidney, leading to a two-month hospital stay while doctors gave her anti-rejection treatments. When the transplant doctors questioned whether Brown would be able to pull through, her nephrologist told them she was a fighter.

“I been fighting my whole life,” she said. “They continued the treatments. I had to go on a breathing machine after my surgery.”

She was finally released on March 20, 2018. She said the first thing she did was take a walk over to her mother's house, who only lives a few blocks away.

“I was down for so long, I wasn't able to walk. It felt so good because I can do that now,” she said.

And she began taking care of her children on her own.

“My kids always had to take care of me, so it feels good to take care of them now,” she said. “I was able to go to my daughter's graduation. That felt so good. She graduated from South Lake, and now she attends Saginaw Valley” State University.

Brown feels like she has a new lease on life. She just “graduated” from having to be checked at the hospital several times per week to, now, only having to go every three months. Her blood pressure is normal, and she begins training in April to help others living with kidney disease.

“I start my training as a peer mentor to help people in the situation I was in ... talk to them and give them hope,” she said. “I want to encourage other people to stay encouraged. It's always better to talk to someone who's going through the same (thing). To encourage others to stay strong. It's not over. It's going to be hard, but it's worth it in the end.”



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Brown stands with her daughter, Ausanae Quarles, during her graduation from South Lake High School in 2018.

Photo provided by Jeritha Brown

Joyce Williams, with the National Kidney Foundation of Michigan, said that kidney disease is often invisible, which is why it's important for people like Brown to share their story. The National Kidney Foundation of Michigan should be one of the first places a person calls after receiving a diagnosis of kidney disease, she said.

"Seventy percent of kidney disease is preventable because it is caused by diabetes and high blood pressure," Williams said in an email interview. "And, like many chronic diseases, it can be prevented with a healthy diet and an active lifestyle. A simple urine test at the doctor's office can determine if you have it or not."

Brown will also be participating in her first Kidney Walk in May at the Detroit Zoo.

"Considering all I've overcome, it's truly amazing," she said. "It's very important to me to do that and the peer mentoring, because I'm walking for a cause."

Williams said that peer mentors like Brown are important for those living with kidney disease or those who have had kidney transplants. They work one-on-one to support them, answer their questions and help them navigate the health care system.

Now, Brown is just enjoying living a normal life. She put up her Christmas tree in October because she had missed so many Christmases and birthdays that she felt she needed to catch up.

"I enjoyed this year," she said. Missing out on school events and activities with her youngest daughter broke her heart, she said, "and now I feel so good because I can go up (to the school) and I can volunteer."

To donate to the 2019 Kidney Walk at the Detroit Zoo in Brown's name, visit bndfr.com/XjCIX (<http://bndfr.com/XjCIX>).

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