

## Rogers Hi-Speed Internet Member Profile: Kurt Penner

One member shares his story of life and death

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Imagine what it's like knowing you're alive because someone else has died. That's the reality Rogers Hi-Speed Internet member Kurt Penner lives with, after undergoing a double lung transplant last year. He doesn't know who saved his life, but he's grateful that person chose to become an organ donor.

Two years ago, 54-year-old Penner and his wife Lila were living in Calgary unaware their lives were about to change dramatically. In February 2001, Penner, who had been experiencing some shortness of breath, was diagnosed with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). According to the Canadian Lung Association, COPD is "a disease that causes the airways of the lungs to be inflamed and become 'obstructed' or blocked." More than 750,000 Canadians have been diagnosed with COPD and it's the fifth leading cause of death in North America today.



Up until then, Penner says he was "a relatively active individual." He was a man known to take yearly trips with his family, to drive the boys to hockey and soccer, and to ride his bike 10 kilometres to work each way every day.

He expresses frustration when it comes to knowing why he developed COPD. "I must admit that I was a moderate smoker," he says. "But to the best of my knowledge, this was not the sole cause of my problems." He believes growing up on a farm with insecticides and herbicides contributed to his illness, as well as living in a home with a water cistern and a cellar as opposed to a basement. "In retrospect, that is another one of the factors that made this experience so taxing," he says. "Doctors could not explain the reason for my condition."

In April 2001, Penner was placed on 24-hour oxygen and told he couldn't return to work. Just one month later, his doctor broke the news that he would require a lung transplant. Denial was his first reaction.

"Why me?" he asked. "Not having considered that I would ever require something like this, it takes the mind awhile to wrap itself around the realization that you're terminally ill and have a limited life span remaining."

Because lungs are one of the most fragile organs, time is critical between harvesting and transplanting. Living in Calgary proved to be problematic for the Penners, as patients must live within a two-hour drive of a transplant centre to be placed on the waiting list. There was no lung transplant centre in Calgary. That meant moving to Dorchester, Ontario, where they'd be near relatives and the London Health Science Centre (LHSC). Unfortunately, the day Penner was to be placed on the transplant list was the same day the LHSC lung transplant program relocated to Toronto. The Penners then faced a two-hour drive each way whenever Kurt needed treatment.



Still living on 24-hour oxygen and incapacitated to the point where physical activity was nearly non-existent, Penner passed his days surfing the Web. He scoured medical sites for information about COPD. He looked up the medical terms his doctors used. He researched rehabilitation, stats on organ transplants and donations, and the success rate of his impending surgery.

"The information I obtained from the Web brought comfort," he says. "I was able to determine that successful lung transplants are being performed and that I had not necessarily been given a death sentence."

It was then that the waiting began. "When you're in the position of requiring a transplant, you realize there is no alternative," says Penner. "After going through various stages of feeling sorry for yourself, asking why, and general denial that you need it, you resign yourself to the realization that it's out of your control and fate will, or will not, deliver."

Three months after being placed on the waiting list, on June 22, 2002, Penner and his wife got the call they'd been waiting for. A match had been found. He underwent surgery that evening at Toronto General Hospital, and began the long road to recovery.

During his recovery, Lila used the Internet to keep family and friends up to date on her husband's condition. Penner says he looked forward to the stack of emails his wife brought to the hospital each day. "Our friends and associates would forward my information on to their friends," he says. "This resulted in good wishes being received from individuals I had not been in contact with for an extended period. Friendships were renewed and new friendships were made."

Now he uses the Internet to keep in touch with other transplant patients he met throughout his ordeal. "It's phenomenal the bonds that were developed," he says.

Today, nearly nine months after his transplant, Penner says he's slowly returning to his former self. While exercise was once an impossibility, he now works out four times a week with free weights and a treadmill. He still takes 18 pills a day (down from the initial 44) and feels some discomfort where his rib cage was split apart during the surgery.



Penner now spends much of his free time crusading for organ donation. "When you are in the position of requiring a transplant, you continually ask 'Why is it so difficult to find a replacement organ?'" he says. "The death of another individual is certainly a tragedy; however, there is some good that can come from it."

He wants people to know that "organ donation is costless, but provides a costless return," and that signing an organ donation card isn't enough. "Of utmost importance is to ensure your wishes are relayed to, and expressly understood, by your kin," he says. "Often, without prior discussion, the next of kin is reluctant to bring themselves to consent to organ donation despite the existence of a previously signed card."

Penner would also like to encourage people to wear a green ribbon. He says it's as significant for organ donation as the pink ribbon is for cancer.

"The whole transplant experience is extremely stressful emotional and financially," he says. "However, the end result is definitely worth the risk and I am extremely grateful to the family of my donor. Thank you, thank you, thank you!"