

Friend indeed

6 years after camp, buddy offers kidney to OT, CPT Lisa Smurr

*by Sgt. Chuck Wagner
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They struggled through physical training together. They slept the same short hours, ate the same drab food, and learned lessons on leading by example, making sound decisions, and laying it on the line for a buddy.

Although they lost contact for six years after meeting during an officer training camp, those early lessons aren't lost. Capt. Lisa Horak is giving a kidney to former platoon mate Capt. Lisa Smurr, whom she has learned is facing a lifetime of dialysis that will restrict her love of travel and take years off her life.

Horak's offer has fallen into place with such head-shaking coincidence, their reunion appears divinely fated.

Both attended a Reserve Officer Training Corps advanced camp at Fort Lewis, Wash., during the summer of '98.

Like most of the 40-odd young Soldiers, they bonded under intense physical and mental duress over those five weeks. Also like most, they lost track of each other after their first assignments scattered them like the wind. Horak went to Hawaii, Smurr to Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

Smurr, an occupational therapist, later transferred to Landstuhl, Germany, a move she could have declined after blood tests showed her kidneys were not functioning. She had been on a preventative diet and received routine monitoring since her mother needed a new kidney in 2002. She went because "A big part of me thought I was invincible. I love to travel and I was excited to live in Europe."

After seven months overseas, Smurr's kidney functions did not improve, and the Army told her to return in January to Walter Reed Army Medical Center where it had specialists on staff who might help.

Horak meanwhile received orders to Walter Reed working in the short stay unit. She first realized Smurr was in Washington when she spotted her platoon-mate's name on an appointment list.

They met when Smurr arrived at the unit for a kidney biopsy. Smurr was reeling from the sudden reversal in her life and a personal crash course in mortality.

"It finally hit me. This is something I have. This is with me, it's not going to go away," Smurr says.

Horak stepped in quickly as a comfort, and, for an emotionally bankrupt friend, a Godsend.

"We were discussing kidney transplants one evening. And I said 'I'll give you a kidney,'" Horak recalls, sitting up straight and squaring her shoulders while sitting on the carpet in Smurr's Arlington apartment. "The decision was that quick. I had a really hard time thinking about not helping someone in her position. I couldn't just hold her hand and say it's too bad, I wish they could find a kidney."

Smurr's health hasn't drastically deteriorated, but she senses a slow drain on her energy. She's on a national organ recipient's list, but it could take several years for a suitable kidney to be made available, especially since her O blood type, the universal type, means a matching kidney could fit most recipients above her on the list.

Another option is dialysis treatment to periodically flush the kidneys. Dialysis can be brutal on the body, and each year under dialysis can mean a nine percent shortening of a person's expected life. Dialysis would also greatly cut short her passion for travel because she'd have to stay near a treatment center. Without a new kidney, she could expect to begin the treatment in February of next year.

Smurr didn't want to build fragile hope, and she played stoic until doctors confirmed the suitability of Horak's kidney. They were astounded to discover Horak's kidney matched nearly as well as a sister's kidney might. With a living donor matching so well, Smurr has the best possible chances for the kidney to take.

"My life in the past eight months has hit rock bottom," Smurr says with consigned bravery. "I crawled my way up, and the beach is right there in front of me. I don't want to believe I'm there until it's certain. But even after the surgery, it's still a long road ahead. God seems to be pointing the direction." She looks up at Horak, then off to one side, as if into a future that is slowly taking form again. "I'm not ready to exit. There's a lot I want to accomplish. I always dreamed and hoped I might live to be 100," Smurr says, her eyes misting.

Smurr's long road includes treatment with immune system suppressants to decrease her body's rejection of the kidney, and an expected kidney transplant life of 18 years. Even if everything works out optimally, she may require another kidney in her lifetime. She may also lose her military career. A medical board considering her case may find there are too many infectious dangers in a hospital for an employee with suppressed immunity. "I love my job and I wouldn't choose another population to work with. I treat Soldiers, mostly amputees, and that gives me an incredible rush," says Smurr.

She hopes to hear from the medical board next month. Again, she is trying to avoid investing emotion in the outcome, which like so much else in her life seems out of her control.

A friend made, lost, then returned is one of the only things she can count on right now, and they spend a lot of time together. It's a friendship that often doesn't need stated; it's simply there, and powerful. "Some people tell me what I'm doing is wonderful. But I'm no superhero. It doesn't take a superhero, it just takes a person," says Horak. "If people think it takes a superhero, then few will step forward to do it. "I've already been told it's a painful procedure, but I'm not scared. She's going to get my kidney."



Buddies during advanced camp six years ago, Lisa Smurr, left, and Lisa Horak in a snapshot on Fort Lewis, Wash.



After a surprise reunion, Capt. Lisa Harok, left, is offering a healthy kidney to Capt. Lisa Smurr.