

STRENGTH IN UNITY

Airline Pilots Securing Their Future Through ALPA

All in the Family

Pilot back in the air, thanks to a generous spirit.

The airline pilot piloting profession is like one big family. Airline pilots can argue, tease, and bond like any other family. And when one of their own is in trouble, their family does what it can to help. This is one such story.

Capt. Todd Armstrong (US Airways–West) went on medical leave in September 2004, after abnormal kidney function was detected during a first-class medical examination for his upgrade to captain. He immediately visited a specialist in kidney disease and in October was diagnosed with Berger's disease, a chronic disorder of the kidneys that prevents them from filtering toxins from the bloodstream. Ironically, though Todd was too sick to fly the line, he was considered too healthy to qualify for an immediate kidney transplant, and his kidneys continued to fail. By May 2005, Todd's kidney output had fallen to only 15 percent of normal. He began a regimen of kidney dialysis, three 5-hour days per week.

When Todd's health crisis began, his wife, First Officer Julee Armstrong (US Airways–West), was expecting their third child and raising their two toddlers, Garrett and William. Todd had gone on medical leave during the same week that Julee went on maternity leave to give birth to a healthy son, Grayson, in November 2004.

As Todd's condition grew more serious, he was told an immediate kidney transplant was needed to save his life. The wait for a cadaver kidney can take as many as 5 years, and qualified, healthy donors are relatively rare. Many willing people submit to the extensive physical examination to qualify for kidney donation, only to be turned down because they don't match the patient's blood chemistry or kidney structure.

To start the long, uncertain process of finding a kidney donor, in early 2005 Julee sent a letter describing Todd's urgent need for a kidney to all the Armstrongs' family members and friends. Todd's sister, Nykole, was the first to come forward and offer one of her kidneys. Blood rela-

tives are often qualified donors, as they typically have the same blood type and chemistry as the recipient, but Nykole did not have a kidney suitable for transplant. Julee said that as she continued the quest, "Having to watch Todd silently suffer made me feel much more frantic, mainly because of the time it took between testing potential donors. For me, each day that passed was a day wasted."

A potential donor must submit to an extensive battery of tests that amounts to a 4-day physical examination. In Todd's case, these medical evaluations were done by the Transplant Review Committee at the Mayo Clinic. The information gleaned from these tests takes several weeks to compile and evaluate.

A close family friend stepped forward to donate a kidney to Todd and passed the physical, but then withdrew for personal and family reasons, again dashing the hopes of the Armstrong family. Capt. Ted Gilstrap (US Airways–West) became the third person to take the physical. Ted and Todd are close friends and enjoyed riding off-road motorcycles together. Ted was extremely disappointed to learn that, though his blood type and chemistry matched, the blood vessel structure of his kidneys made them unsuitable for transplant.

As the search for a kidney donor dragged on, so did Todd's dialysis treatments. He would often return home



ABOVE: F/O Julee and Capt. Todd Armstrong (both US Airways–West) sit with their sons, Grayson, Garrett, and William. RIGHT: Capt. Jim Layman (US Airways–West) and wife, Sharon (Todd's kidney donor), sit with daughters Katie and Stephanie.



from treatment very tired and drained. To provide him with a quiet home to recover in, and so the boys would not have to see their dad looking so fatigued, Julee would gather toys, snacks, and fruit drinks for the toddlers, place month-old Grayson in a sling, and go to the park to entertain her two very active children and the baby.

Then, Sharon Layman, the wife of Capt. Jim Layman (US Airways–West), came forward to test as a kidney donor for Todd. Sharon had been the station manager for ALPA carrier GP Express in Minneapolis, Minn., when Jim, Todd,

Asked why she chose to donate a kidney to Todd, Sharon Layman, wife of Capt. Jim Layman (US Airways–West), responded: “I kept thinking about those three little boys growing up without a father. I had no choice but to donate a kidney to Todd so those boys could have a father who was alive and well.”

and Julee were GP Express pilots. They’ve been close friends for many years. Sharon had recently coordinated a blood drive, Giving Neighbors Life, for her employer, State Farm Insurance. As a first-time blood donor, she learned that her blood type was compatible with Todd’s.

On Aug. 8, 2005, Sharon began the 4-day physical to see if she was qualified medically to donate a kidney to Todd. She passed the physical with flying colors. As soon as she learned she was a match, she drove to the Armstrong house and found the entire family assembled in the kitchen, almost as if they were waiting for her. Sharon told Todd and Julee: “You are looking at someone who can help you.” All of them shared tears of relief and joy.

Sharon then quickly became the driving force behind the kidney transplant. Time was of the essence, as Todd’s health further degraded. She asked the Mayo Clinic kidney transplant coordinator to schedule the surgery for the earliest available date. Typically, these surgeries are scheduled for many months in the future, usually to accommodate the donor’s schedule. State Farm encourages its employees to help others, and it granted Sharon an open medical leave. Todd’s surgery was performed on Sept. 30, 2005, less than 2 months after Sharon was approved for the transplant.

As both the Armstrong and Layman families live in the same neighborhood in Phoenix, Ariz., the kidney recipient and his donor decided to drive together to the Mayo Clinic in Scottsdale on the morning of the surgery. Sharon de-

scribes the long, predawn drive as a surreal experience, knowing that both were about to undergo major surgery that could save Todd’s life. Another team—Sharon’s husband, Jim, and Todd’s wife, Julee—also drove together to the Mayo Clinic, arriving later to be with Todd and Sharon when they woke up in the recovery room.

The surgery to remove Sharon’s kidney began 30 minutes before Todd’s surgery. The operating theaters were next to each other so that Sharon’s kidney could be transferred to Todd as quickly as possible. Although Sharon’s surgery began before Todd’s, she awoke in the recovery room after he did. The first person she saw was Todd, giving her a thumbs-up sign from a bed on the other side of the room.

Todd was discharged 2 days after the transplant. The health and vitality of a kidney recipient usually improve immediately, from both having a fully functioning kidney and ending dialysis. Todd was no exception. He was up and around almost immediately; in fact, he and Jim Layman ate cheeseburgers in the hospital cafeteria only 1 day after the surgery.

The kidney donor often has a longer and more difficult recovery period. Besides recovering from major surgery, Sharon’s body had to adjust to having only one kidney. In contrast to Todd, Sharon could hardly get out of bed and walk. She also was discharged 2 days after the surgery, but spent 6 weeks at home recovering. Jim said, “My wife has the biggest heart. The help I gave to her during recovery was minor, compared to the gift she gave to our friend.”

Todd got his first-class medical certificate in record time and went back to flying the line in March 2006. He sees his kidney specialist for regular evaluation of his kidney function and takes two anti-rejection medications twice a day. Todd and Julee balance line flying with the needs of a young family at home. And to protect the kidney that Sharon gave him, Todd no longer rides off-road motorcycles or participates in vigorous sports.

Jim Layman is still flying the line. Sharon, now fully recovered, will open the Sharon Layman State Farm Insurance Agency in Tempe, Ariz., in January 2007. She remains a very strong advocate for organ transplant and often spends her spare time advising other potential kidney donors about the importance of this life-saving procedure.

Asked why she chose to donate a kidney to Todd, she responded: “I kept thinking about those three little boys growing up without a father. I had no choice but to donate a kidney to Todd so those boys could have a father who was alive and well.”

Julee Armstrong added, “Sharon Layman gave Todd his life back, gave me my husband back, and gave the boys their dad back.” —*Capt. John Bergeson (US Airways–West)*