

## A Most Precious Gift

Contributed by Larry Young -- Black College Wire  
Wednesday, 11 February 2009

Southern AD looks back at kidney transplant; looks ahead to future

Greg LaFleur, Southern University's athletic director, never dreamed he would one day take part in saving a man's life.

Instead, the Ville Platte native often dreamed of playing in the NFL.

And he did.

But last November, the former LSU tight end and retired St. Louis Cardinal donated a kidney and helped give the most precious gift of all, life. Even more gratifying, LaFleur's kidney donation went to the man that gave him life 50 years ago, his 74-year-old father, Gervis. Early last summer Gervis learned only a kidney transplant would restore his health, and from there, Greg went to work.

After deciding he would donate, Greg began meeting with specialists who recommended he walk daily and eat the right things in order for his kidney to make the transition into Gervis's body.

Needless to say, Greg began walking at 5:30 a.m. every morning before work and watched what he consumed. The exercise lowered his blood pressure.

And the payoff for following the doctor's orders resulted in Greg being able to donate his kidney to help preserve Gervis's life on Nov. 18.

"It's not like I was just giving a kidney to my father. I was giving it to my best friend," Greg said. "I didn't want to lose my best friend."

That Tuesday morning inside of Tulane Medical Center in New Orleans, a surgeon cut open a 4-inch fold near Greg's navel to clear the way for three arthroscopic incisions and carefully pushed aside some of his blood vessels still connected to their arteries before removing his kidney and placing it inside Gervis.

In all, the surgery took about three hours. But in that room, that day, Greg's willingness to help gave Gervis new life as the kidney began to function almost immediately.

"I gave him life and years later he gave it back," Gervis said. "It couldn't have come from a better person."

Also, none of this would have been possible had it not been for Gervis's wife, Lena.

"One of the most important factors is that I have a good wife that made sure everything went right," Gervis said.

To Lena a mere kidney surgery was nothing. This was her sixth time ushering Gervis through surgery. In all, there was his left kidney surgery in 1954, his appendix surgery, a gangrene cleanup, a hernia and prostate surgery in 2006.

After his prostate surgery, Gervis's kidney began to fail and he went on dialysis. The sight of his father, his best friend suffering became too much for Greg to handle.

"Greg makes me stronger and keeps me going," Gervis said. "He gives me great pride knowing he cares for me that way."

Thankfully, that kind of an attitude runs in the family.

Years ago Gervis's son Rod needed a kidney transplant and his sister Lez donated. This time was Greg's turn.

It was during this time that Greg became a kidney expert, doing research and reading up on Alonzo Mourning, a former NBA player that needed a kidney transplant in 2003. Greg also went as far as reading Mourning's book, "Resilience: Faith, Focus, Triumph."

Like Gervis, Mourning received a kidney.

And like Mourning, Gervis faced a 30 percent chance his body could have rejected Greg's kidney, mistaking it for a "foreign invader." But it was during time the family focused more on the 70 percent success rate.

"Our family is really close," Gervis said. "When anyone of us has a problem, it becomes everybody's problem."

In fact, Greg noted he was never worried about himself going into the surgery. Instead, he was more concerned about Gervis. He saw his best friend fading and simply didn't want him to slip away.

And he didn't.

"I didn't have to ask for it," Gervis said. "There was never any doubt Greg would donate if he could."

To Greg's delight, Gervis is back to his old self, now in his third week back at work and feeling healthy again.

"I'm back to being myself. Feeling like a champ," Gervis said. "I hadn't totally regained my strength, yet. But I can see a difference, an improvement."

According to renalweb.com, kidney transplants are the second most common transplant operation in the United States, with cornea transplants first. Also, in October 2002, there were 53 thousand people on waiting lists for kidney transplants.

Gervis hopes to change that statistic in the near future. He said he plans to be an advocate for kidney transplants to enhance the chance of those in need to find a donor.

"I think a lot of people have not done that because they don't quite understand the whole picture," Gervis said. "People such as I and others that have gone through it should be willing to educate others."

Gervis goes for a final checkup at Tulane Medical Center on Feb. 19.

After his doctor visits are done, hopefully Gervis can paint a perfect picture for everyone who didn't see it so clearly before.

{moshaloscan}

Larry Young writes for The Southern Digest, the Southern University student newspaper, which originally published this article.