

Virginian Pilot

Kidney failure doesn't stop long bike riders

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VIRGINIA BEACH

Leading up to his 220-mile bike ride through South Carolina, Beach resident Alphonso Jefferson trained like any other cyclist would - except he had to undergo daily dialysis treatment.

Jefferson, 39, who suffered kidney failure 16 years ago, recently finished his second Tour DaVita, a three-day 220-mile bike ride for kidney disease awareness, held Sept. 14-17.

"I really want to help raise awareness because it is a preventable and easily treatable disease," said Jefferson, 39. "But it was also for me to help prove something to myself, to prove that I could do it. I used to swim and do a lot of things prior to being on dialysis. This was a way for me to say 'Hey, you're OK and you can do whatever you want.' "

But Jefferson's outlook wasn't always so sunny.

While he was in the Army, Jefferson fell and hurt his back. It was this accident that led him to a Veterans Administration hospital, where he was diagnosed with kidney failure. He received a medical discharge at 23 years old. The once-active Jefferson began eight years of three-days-a-week dialysis treatments.

"In the beginning, it was very difficult, and quite depressing," Jefferson said.

After an infection from peritoneal dialysis, a nurse recommended home hemodialysis, which, Jefferson said, gave him control back over his life.

Now, he's back to his old ways: swimming and riding his bike daily. He is a real estate agent in Virginia Beach, where he lives with his wife and 2-year-old son.

Last year, one of Jefferson's nurses told him about Tour DaVita, which raises funds for the Kidney TRUST, which provides no-cost kidney screenings in nonmedical settings. During the three-day

bike ride, participants also stop in to visit dialysis patients at various clinics.

"I wish back when I was going through that rough time I had someone to tell me you can live a normal life," Jefferson said. "That's why I do these events. I like talking to new patients - if I can give them one nugget of knowledge that can help them change their lives, it'll be worth it."

Similarly, Beach resident Jan Morrow, 56, made it a point to train for Tour DaVita - even though she had three surgeries in four days earlier this year. The tour raised \$1 million.

Kidney failure hit Morrow suddenly in 2008. Morrow, then a secondary school teacher for the deaf and hard-of-hearing in Norfolk, was out for a morning run when her legs began feeling strange.

By the next week, she was in the hospital with end-stage kidney disease, in which the kidneys are no longer able to work at a level needed for day-to-day life. She was critically anemic and was diagnosed with amyloidosis, a blood disorder in which insoluble protein cells accumulate in tissues and organs throughout the body.

Doctors also found a cancerous mass in her lung, which they removed.

"Prior to 2008, I'd never been sick in my life," Morrow said.

Morrow is a patient at the same DaVita dialysis center as Jefferson.

She has trained for Tour DaVita all year, despite the fact she had three surgeries in four days this summer. That was because the site in her arm where the needle goes stopped working, and complications arose from high potassium, a low red blood cell count, and clotting.

"I'd like to get the word out about kidney awareness. Anything that affects the kidneys, you need to have screenings and tests," Morrow said. "You don't think about kidneys until you don't have them."

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