

UWHealth: Lung transplant recipient plays on thanks to donor

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MADISON, Wis. – The hum of Dave Furumoto’s bagpipes is a welcome sound in his home once again.

For more than two years, the instrument sat silent, its player unable to muster the strength to inflate a balloon, let alone his beloved bagpipes.

“It started slowly with this cough I couldn’t shake. I thought I had bronchitis,” Furumoto said. “I couldn’t figure out what was making me so sick and short of breath.”

Following X-ray imaging to investigate his symptoms and treatment with antibiotics for his cough, he was referred to a pulmonologist at UW Health in 2019. The pulmonologist diagnosed Furumoto with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis. Idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis is a chronic disease that develops when the lung tissue becomes thick and stiff, according to Dr. Erin Lowery, medical director of the UW Health Lung Transplant Program, and associate professor of pulmonary medicine, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health.

“Over time, this disease causes permanent scarring in the lungs,” she said. “The disease typically progresses two to five years after diagnosis and because there is no cure, patients like Dave may eventually need to rely on oxygen around the clock.”

For Furumoto, that meant depending on a portable oxygen machine anytime he went to work as a professor in the theater and drama department at UW-Madison. In August 2021, while directing a show for the department, he was hospitalized for nearly a week. He recovered in time to see his production performed in

September but was dependent on oxygen at all times. His lungs had deteriorated to the point where he had to retire from his position at the university. At the same time as his retirement, Furumoto and his doctors began to discuss the possibility of a lung transplant. Furumoto understood a lung transplant was a complex surgery that required lifelong care. He also understood he wanted to return to playing the bagpipes, acting and traveling to his birthplace in Hawaii. With those goals in mind, Furumoto and his care team decided to move forward with a bilateral lung transplant.

He was placed on the active transplant waitlist on Nov. 1, 2021, and he received his transplant within 10 days. Dr. Daniel McCarthy, surgical director of the UW Health Lung Transplant Program, and associate professor of surgery, UW School of Medicine and Public Health, completed the surgery.

“When patients with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis are as sick as Dave was and need such high levels of oxygen, a transplant is the best option to improve quality of life,” he said. “To see him once again embracing his hobbies is a testament to the lifesaving gift of organ donation.”

Furumoto says he spent three weeks at University Hospital recovering from the surgery and went home shortly before Thanksgiving 2021.

“The care has just been excellent,” Furumoto said. “My lungs were on their last legs and my transplant came just in time.”

Furumoto returns to the UW Health Transplant Center for regular checkups with Lowery to test how well his new lungs are functioning and to monitor for any fluid buildup and rejection. In January 2023, his care team gave him the green light to resume traveling.

“My friends in Honolulu threw me a wonderful luau to celebrate my new lungs,” Furumoto said. “After that, I took a weeklong trip to Tokyo that I had been looking forward to for years.”

Furumoto wrote a heartfelt thank you note to his donor’s family to express his gratitude for their loved one’s gift. That gift has allowed him to travel as well as resume his many passions, including playing the bagpipes and working as a producer of Asian theater. Furumoto also hopes to return to his acting career.

“Every morning, I wake up and say thank you to my donor,” he said. “You need a good set of lungs to do kabuki, to interact and connect with your audience and I am grateful to the donor who gave me an opportunity to get back on stage.”

Furumoto is the director on a performance piece that debuts in San Francisco in September and plans to resume playwriting.