

B H A P E



“I’m 74, going on 61,” says Virginia (“Ginger”) Langland Bennett, sprightly and cheerful three years after receiving a kidney transplant in 2010. “Life is good.”

So good, in fact, that Virginia engages in and even supervises some of the activities, such as potlucks and luncheons, that take place in Laurel Oaks, the Lacey, WA retirement community in which she lives, and plans to volunteer this fall to help in



schools and senior centers in her area. “I want to give back because of what everyone has given to me,” she says. Simpatico with her new kidney, which she has named “Lucky,” Virginia is free of pain and full of energy. There are no restrictions on her activities, including travel. She recently spent six weeks in Palm Springs and anticipates going on cruises in the near future. Although she requires some 30 medications daily, including anti-rejection drugs, must go to Federal Way’s Virginia Mason Hospital for blood tests twice a month, and checks in with her doctors at Seattle’s Virginia Mason once a month, she considers none of these necessities a problem. Her greatest frustration these days? “Making my computer do what it’s supposed to do!”

But there was a time when things didn’t go quite so smoothly for Virginia. In 1976 she was diagnosed with what was then called manic depression. Doctors prescribed the anti-depressant drug Lithium, the usage of which over a 21-year period nearly destroyed her kidneys. Virginia explains, “It’s the job of the kidneys to filter the waste materials from our blood. The creatinine level is the blood test that monitors this function. This tells us how well the kidneys are functioning. Normal level is 0.6-1.5.” By November 1997 Virginia’s blood pressure had jumped to 222/111 and her creatinine level had soared to 7.1, both alarming figures. Doctors required her to change her medication immediately, without allowing her system a period of adjustment, resulting in an unfortunate effect upon her mental health. In her words, “I went crazy.” Virginia was hearing and seeing things that did not exist, and doctors twice placed her briefly in the psychiatric ward at St. Peter’s Hospital in Olympia. While she was there, the doctors sought to work out the right medication for her. Virginia recalls this as “the worst time in my whole life.” She got through it, however, buoyed by the love and support of her family and friends. Doctors found the right medication, Virginia’s body adapted to it, and her mental and physical condition improved. When her Nephrologist predicted that, despite the improvement, she would need to go on dialysis within two years, she set about to prove him wrong. By adopting a low-protein, low-potassium diet, drinking lots of water, and walking regularly, Virginia was able to avoid dialysis for 12 years! But the damage had been done. Although family members and friends offered to donate a kidney, Virginia did not want to put that kind of burden on anyone, so in 2007 she was placed on the Virginia Mason transplant list.

To Virginia, the “waiting” for her new kidney was excruciating at times; however, little did she know that the “waiting” would turn out to be the easy part. After just one year on the list, Virginia removed her name so that she could devote her full attention to taking care of her beloved husband, Jim, who was rapidly deteriorating from a rare, genetic disease—Cadasil. After Jim passed away in September 2009, Virginia’s daughters, Leasa and Vicky, convinced her it was time to tend to her own needs, so she went back on Virginia Mason’s transplant list in January 2010 and, in order to be as healthy as possible for a transplant, began dialysis in February.

In the next few months, Virginia was offered a kidney six times but accepted none, either because she was not a good match for them or because she was not satisfied with the health or age of the donor. Then, on October 9, 2010, “Lucky” number 7 came along, and Leasa urged Virginia to accept this healthy kidney from a 26-year-old man who had died unexpectedly. The transplant took place the next day, following which Virginia spent a week in the hospital recovering and then recuperated at Leasa’s home for one month. After that, she returned to her own home in Lacey and was able to take care of herself with the help of friends.

From her complicated experience with the medical world, Virginia offers this advice: (1) “As a patient, there are NO wrong or stupid questions.” (2) “Verify with your doctors all prescribed tests, the results of those tests, the prescribed medications, as well as the procedures your doctors want you to follow.” (3) “Most importantly, verify and know what medications the pharmacist has filled for you. Find a way to keep it all organized and EASY for you, as the patient, to track.”

Virginia is a survivor. When adversity comes along, she deals with it directly and matter-of-factly. The transplant? “It’s not such a big deal. I don’t think I’ve done anything abnormal.”

“It’s your attitude that makes your life,” Virginia says, and she conveys hers to the world every time she hits the road in her sky-blue Subaru that sports a personalized license plate reading “B HAP E.”