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St. Joseph's Hospital and
Medical Center

NEWS RELEASE

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Arizona transplant doctor thankful for lifesaving double lung transplant at Dignity Health St. Joseph's in Phoenix after contracting COVID-19

PHOENIX (Nov. 24, 2021) – An Arizona kidney transplant physician is thankful to have received a lifesaving double lung transplant at Dignity Health St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center after contracting COVID-19.



Prior to receiving new lungs, Dr. Berne Yee's journey took him through three hospitals and a month-long coma as he battled the deadly virus, which has killed more than 21,000 Arizonans. Nearly a year later, the 66-year-old kidney transplant physician is looking forward to a small, quiet Thanksgiving with his new set of lungs and a new lease on life.

"There were multiple times that I didn't think I was going to make it," Dr. Yee says. "But when I woke up one day and the nurse said, 'We've found organs,' I thought, 'the Lord has given me a second chance.'"

Dr. Yee, a University of Arizona alumnus and longtime Phoenix, Ariz. nephrologist, fell ill in late December 2020. One day after being diagnosed with COVID-19, Dr. Yee was admitted to the hospital on Jan. 4.

"I was thinking that I would turn around and get out of the hospital in seven to 10 days," Dr. Yee says.

He was off by five and a half months.

The virus ravaged Dr. Yee's lungs. He was placed on a ventilator in mid-February and awoke from an induced coma a month later. Doctors told him that his lungs had been irreversibly damaged and suggested that he consider a transplant. Dr. Yee initially rejected that idea, but he changed his mind after struggling to breathe without assistance.

"I asked the doctors, 'What are my options?'" Dr. Yee recalls. "They said, 'Have a lung transplant or you're not going to make it through this.'"

The Yees researched lung transplant programs and decided to seek treatment at Dignity Health St. Joseph's Norton Thoracic Institute, home to one of the nation's leading lung transplant programs.

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After consulting with doctors at Norton and undergoing pre-transplant testing, Dr. Yee was placed on a list of potential lung recipients. About twelve days after being transferred to St. Joseph's in April, he received the gift of life and underwent a double lung transplant. Dr. Yee then spent about a month in St. Joseph's inpatient neuro-rehabilitation program managed by Barrow Neurological Institute before being discharged on June 10. His grandsons, whom he had not seen in months, among other family members were there to greet him as St. Joseph's staff staged a "clap out" to celebrate his release.

"I cannot say enough about what Norton Thoracic Institute has done for me," Dr. Yee says. "It's a team approach and it's not their first rodeo."

Lung transplants are among the most complicated surgical procedures. Recipients require lifelong care. Norton's lung transplant program has outstanding quality scores and shorter than average wait times for donor organs. Since opening the program in 2007, the team has performed more than 1,000 lung transplants for patients ranging in age from 15 to 79 years old from more than 35 states and seven foreign countries.

"Our staff works very closely with each of our patients and their families during the transplant process," says Rajat Walia, MD, medical director of Norton's lung transplant program and one of Dr. Yee's lung transplant pulmonologists. "We are delighted by Dr. Yee's progress and excited to see that this respected physician, who has given so much to the transplant community in his medical tenure, is working hard to return to some of his normal activities."

In addition to safely spending quality time with family, those activities include celebrating Dr. Yee's birthday and the couple's 40th wedding anniversary, both of which occurred during his hospitalization.

"We thought that, being vaccinated, we would go on a nice trip for our anniversary," Lily Yee says. "But we celebrated it in acute neuro rehab instead. So, we had do-over celebrations after he was discharged and now our goal is just to get stronger together."



Dr. Yee says he is slowly regaining his strength and his breathing capacity now that he's finished with regular outpatient therapy sessions at St. Joseph's. He and Lily walk together around their neighborhood and lift weights at home. And, though it was a difficult decision made with a heavy heart, Dr. Yee has retired from his medical practice to take care of his new lungs.

"One of the things I've realized is that, until you're the patient, you don't know what they're going through. I have a unique understanding now of patients' perspectives and an even greater appreciation for organ donation," he says.