

# **The Gift of Life Pt. 2: Woman reflects on receiving second chance**

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June 2 2017 1:30 PM



**CASEYVILLE** - Lisa Swift-Robbins was misdiagnosed throughout her life, and currently suffers from a calamitous assortment of auto-immune diseases, degenerative disk issues, high blood pressure and - perhaps the worst - focal segmental glomerular sclerosis, which inhibited her kidney functions.

She lived with this condition for more than 29 years, despite its usual life expectancy maximum of less than half that. She said it was a "miracle" she was not on dialysis for most of that experience. Her kidneys were functioning at 15 percent, and she said below 20 percent usually requires dialysis.

"I kept hanging in there," she said. "It felt like the worst hangover every day of my life. I had no energy to get going. That's how bad I felt every day. The last year, I all the time. I was still surprisingly hanging in there at 15 percent."

This daunting sort of optimism was shaken in 2015, when her only son was savagely beaten. Swift-Robbins said he was assaulted by strangers for no reason, and recounted being forced to view the disturbingly graphic incident several times through a surveillance video during the separate trials of the suspects involved.

"It happened the same year as my transplant," she said. "He was almost beat to death. I had to take a break to take care of my son. He had a brain concussion, a torn liver and his jaw was wired shut."

She said the incident gave both her and her son post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), adding she could not imagine the pain her son suffered while going through that level of physical and emotional distress as she watched that video.

"I put myself on hold for that," Swift-Robbins said. "I started feeling really bad. In August, I called my kidney doctor, and he said he had been thinking about me, because I haven't been in for any blood work lately."

When she did return for further blood work, that 15 percent had lowered to 10, and her doctor grimly informed her it was time she went on dialysis. Her kidney function continued to decrease, eventually reaching levels as low as six percent. She was set to start dialysis on Dec. 2, 2015.

While Swift-Robbins was on the transplant list, it was increasingly difficult for her to find a suitable donor, because two of her six antigens were incredibly rare. Five friends and family members were tested, and her husband was the closest match.

Unfortunately, when her husband went to get tested for a match, he was diagnosed with emphysema, which evolved into stage three COPD.

During that grueling process, Swift-Robbins started feeling instances of "brain fog," a symptom she named independently before realizing through research it was the commonly-attached name for what she was feeling.

"I would start driving, and forget where I was going, and go to the store and not know why I was there. It started getting really scary," she recalled.

Just before she fell asleep on Nov. 13, 2015, however, she posted a status update on Facebook, declaring it was National Donor Day. As if the post had unlocked a secret door in the universe, Swift-Robbins received a phone call from Midwest Transplant Services to report to Barnes-Jewish Hospital immediately.

The transplant services had called two people that night, and Swift-Robbins stayed awake through Friday night before receiving the news Saturday to prepare for surgery, because she was a better match for the kidney. She received that new kidney that very Sunday.



The kidney was sourced from Shane Laycock, an 11-year-old Bethalto child who committed suicide by hanging on Nov. 11, 2015, after being viciously bullied at school. Laycock was also diagnosed with autism, which contributed to the meanness of the other children.

After receiving her kidney, Swift-Robbins began suffering from survivor's guilt, because the kidney was not sourced from a living donor. After having several of the symptoms, she researched the issue further and learned ways to cope with it.

In the meantime, she found a family she suspected to be related to the donor, but was proven to be mistaken when the letters started coming through the transplant service. The rules stated she had to wait six months before exchanging letters.

"I received the first letter after six months," she said. "I then knew his name was Shane, and it was not from the other family. When I read that first letter, I knew I wanted to have a relationship with her. We had to wait until after the first three letters to swap information. If I had another boy, I would have named him Shane."

Before Swift-Robbins could mail the third letter to Shane Laycock's mother, Tammy Laycock, her uncle died and her father-in-law had to have his neck rebroken by doctors, because he broke it previously and it did not heal correctly. He was 82 years old and required constant assistance.

Because of her guilt for not being able to send that all-important third letter, Swift-Robbins, who described herself as an "investigator," found Tammy Laycock on Facebook. She considered reaching out to her, and consulted her husband about it. She sent a Facebook message to Tammy Laycock that night (the night before Mother's Day 2017), and hoped for the best.

"I knew we both wanted to meet," Swift-Robbins said. "It would have been different if we did not have that connection already."

Swift-Robbins was also inspired by a photograph of Shane Laycock Tammy had sent in her third letter. She was meditating on it that night, and said she heard Shane Laycock say in her head: *Go see my mom on Mother's Day.*

Besides that beautiful and eerie message, Swift-Robbins noticed several other things had changed about her since receiving Shane Laycock's kidneys. She started craving foods she used to hate and drinking lots of water. She wanted to dip things in ranch dressing, such as sandwiches and pizza - and she used to hate eating pizza.

Tammy Laycock read that message just before noon on Mother's Day and invited Swift-Robbins to visit her in Centralia, Ill. She accepted that invitation, and was delighted to meet with Tammy Laycock.

The two spoke for hours, and went for dinner together. Swift-Robbins was surprised when a large boxer dog owned by Shane Laycock approached her and licked her all over her arms and face. Tammy Laycock said that was unusual behavior for the dog.

During dinner, the two discovered they had several birthdays in common and were wearing the same unusual color of toenail polish. Tammy Laycock also assuaged Swift-Robbins's guilt about not being able to send that third letter by assuring her she knew the two were destined to connect. Tammy Laycock told Swift-Robbins she understood just how hectic and chaotic life can be for people, adding she never lost hope for a meeting.

When Tammy Laycock moved from Centralia to her "forever home" of Gillespie, Ill., she was assisted by Swift-Robbins who got her a U-Haul and a large friend to assist. Within seven hours, Swift-Robbins said she was able to get Tammy Laycock and her family completely moved into their new home.

In the future, both Swift-Robbins and Tammy Laycock said their friendship will continue. Both women said the other one was family to her.



Part one of this story from the perspective of Tammy Laycock can be found [here](#).

