

ED LOWE



Triumph of a Strong Spirit

BROOKLYN-BORN Gary Klausner, 34, grew up in Merrick. At 10, he was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis, a genetic disease affecting approximately 30,000 children and young adults in the United States.

"People just thought I was a highly allergic child," Klausner said last week, "a kid with a lot of colds, a lot of coughing, and a lot of diarrhea. Twenty-four years ago, not much was known about cystic fibrosis."

According to the National Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, cystic fibrosis causes the body to produce an abnormally thick, sticky mucus due to the faulty transport of sodium and chloride (salt) within cells lining, say, the lungs and pancreas, to their outer surfaces. The mucus clogs the lungs, leads to life-threatening infections and obstructs the pancreas, preventing enzymes from reaching the intestines to help digest food. According to the foundation, one half of all individuals with CF live to the age of 31; half do not.

Klausner said that when he was 10 his pediatrician recommended a "sweat test" at Schneider Children's Hospital in New Hyde Park. "They put a plastic bag around your arm and test your perspiration for salt content. I was diagnosed, and I've been seeing the same doctor since then, for all the last 24 years. His name is Jack Gorvov. He just celebrated his 55th anniversary as a medical doctor. He started out as a pediatrician, but for the last 25 years or so, he's been the head of the Cystic Fibrosis Center at Schneider.

"I still see him once a month," said Klausner. "Since I'm 10, I've been taking pancreatic enzymes with every meal to help me digest my food. I'm constantly undergoing pulmonary function tests and chest X-rays. Until the age of 30, I never was hospitalized. In fact, at John F. Kennedy High School in Bellmore, I played a year of JV basketball and two years of varsity tennis. I went to Buffalo State University for one year and played varsity tennis, but then I transferred to the University of Maryland at College Park. It was a much bigger school, and a move from Division III tennis to Division I. The competition was too good.

"When I got out of school, I got a job selling television time, but for the past six years, I've been working with an unbelievable company called Herzog, Heine and Geduld, the largest market-making NASDAQ trading firm in the country. I'm an assistant trader. You can't believe how good this company has been to me and my family, given the circumstances."

Here are the circumstances:

In June of last year, Klausner's health began to deteriorate precipitously. He suffered frequent and severe headaches and fatigue, and he wasn't sleeping through the night. "I probably shouldn't have continued going to work," he said. "But I wanted to become a trader." Earlier in the year, he and his wife, the former Robin Slotnick (also from Merrick), had learned that she was pregnant with twins. As Klausner's health declined, Robin's anxiety rose. Klausner's boss, company president Buzzy Geduld, suggested that he take a week off. He did. He never returned to work.

"My oxygenation rate was down from a normal of 95-plus percent to 78," he said. "I couldn't walk a city block without stopping to rest. I went into Long Island Jewish for 36 days, on oxygen for 24 hours a day, until finally I was told I needed a double lung transplant, or I would not survive. Mean-

while — and we think it was because of stress — my wife went into premature labor. She was in one hospital, and I was in the other.

"I was released from LIJ on September 10. I lived in Merrick with my parents, Walter and Elaine, while Robin gave birth on October 25 to our sons, Matthew and Steven. I was with them for seven days and then gone, again, for seven months. I had to go down to Duke University Hospital to wait for the double lung transplant. Other hospitals had told us that the wait for a pair of lungs would be maybe three years. But in the mucus in my lungs, I also had an organism growing that was not treatable by antibiotics. Some hospitals didn't want to do the transplant, because the chances of my survival were not so good. Duke and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill are both very aggressive, though. I mean, you can't believe these guys. They have three helicopters and a private jet, and when a donor organ becomes available, they go get it.

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"So, on December 17, I'm at the hospital at Duke, while my wife was up in New York, at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital with our son, Matthew, who had to have open heart surgery for a valve repair. I couldn't be with them. She had to go through that alone. I got the call down at Duke three days later that they had found a pair of lungs. They go by blood type. I have type B, and I was on the waiting list with one other B, a 73-year-old guy who was waiting for one lung. So, because this donor lung was a pair,

and a pair is harder to find, I went ahead of him on the list. It's scary. You also can have false alarms, dry runs. You wait hours, and sometimes they find out that the organ is scarred, and they can't use it. Miraculously, mine were all right.

"You can't imagine the relationships you develop under these circumstances. This older man and his wife were rooting for me. And he actually got his lung about six weeks later. I had my transplant the night of December 20. There were complications. They paralyzed my vocal chords. I wasn't able to speak for two months. Robin would call and ask me questions, and I would respond by tapping on the receiver, once for yes, twice for no."

Klausner returned home to the couple's new apartment in Freeport on April 10, his wife's birthday. On May 15, he joined a six-mile walk for the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation at Eisenhower Park, and on Memorial Day, he participated in a similar event in Long Beach. "My doctor walked with me," he said. "That was worth a million dollars.

"Once," he said, "I was 160 pounds. I went down to 107. I'm back to 134. I have a new picture of me and my wife and my kids at Long Beach, and when I showed it to my parents, they broke down and cried."

Promised his job back whenever he can return to work, Klausner plans to meet with his employer this week. He hopes to return by November. •