Transplant House Guests: Lizz and Jerry Mishreki

When Lizz and Jerry met during summer jobs at Disneyland in 1980, liver transplantation was a bit like fantasyland and fairytale. It was certainly not in the young couple's thoughts then, as they met, fell in love, and later married and created a life together.

Yet in September of 2001, when Jerry was **diagnosed with a liver disease that could only be cured with a liver transplant**, life took a major shift. "The doctor said that if Jerry didn't get a new liver in 18 months, he was going to die," recalls Lizz.

Jerry beat that prognosis, but his health declined over the next 16 years. He was on the liver transplant list first at UCLA Medical Center, then Scripps Hospital in La Jolla, CA, and finally, at Cleveland Clinic. When Jerry moved to the "top of the list" in Cleveland (meaning he was among the sickest patients waiting for transplant), **Lizz and Jerry knew it was time to make a temporary move to Cleveland, to wait.** They chose Transplant House of Cleveland as their temporary home.

"We thought about living at an extended stay place," says Lizz. "But I knew I wanted to cook the foods that we're used to—not introduce new or packaged foods—so that meant having a full kitchen. And, we didn't want to drive." Being unfamiliar with driving in snow or ice, they wanted to leave the driving to someone else.

To patients awaiting transplant "top of the list" makes one feel like a donated organ will come any day. **It is hard to watch the weekdays turn to weekends, the calendar pages turn to new months, the weather become shockingly cold**—and "like a snow globe" in Lizz and Jerry's eyes- **and still be waiting, and waiting, and waiting**, for the phone to ring, with the offer of a good organ.

Lizz set up an office in their Transplant House apartment, and she worked remotely—fortunately retaining her full-time job with Concordia University Irvine. The days were broken up by medical appointments for Jerry, and evenings were spent making friends at Transplant House, walking around University Circle, going to the art museum, attending a Cleveland Orchestra concert, and also making a trip to the emergency room, when Jerry's scary symptoms worsened.

Lizz and Jerry brightened the room at Transplant House's weekly dinners provided by volunteer groups. Both of them were compassionate support to other stressed families, and when appropriate, were also the source of great fun and laughter, which helped the entire community move forward.

"**We met great families at Transplant House**," Lizz recalls. "And we still stay in touch with some, like Mike and Melissa Komula of New York. After I got my coffee at the Keurig machine right outside our apartment one morning, I looked down the stairs and Melissa looked up as she was walking into her apartment. We smiled at each other, said good morning, and now we say it was **friendship at first sight!**" Lizz and Melissa became close, did errands together, went out for coffee at Presti's, ate ice cream at Mitchell's, and encouraged one another. Mike and Jerry forged a friendship, as well.

"Transplant House of Cleveland gave us a sense of community," says Jerry. "When you're living in a city you don't know, in order to receive medical care, getting to talk with other caregivers and patients who have gone before you is invaluable."

As their wait for an organ continued, other House guests, including Mike Komula, received their transplants, recovered, and went home. After five increasingly emotional months, Lizz and Jerry made a trip home to

California, to see their daughters, touch base with Lizz's employer, and get respite from the harsh winter weather. Plans had been made to return to Cleveland on April 11, but on April 7th, "the call" came. Jerry was at home in Orange County, when Cleveland Clinic phoned to say he had to get to Cleveland by midnight, or the organ would go to another patient. The scramble began, and resulted in Jerry flying alone—since there was only one seat left on the plane—and Lizz trailing him on a separate flight. Cleveland Clinic police swooped Jerry up at the airport in Cleveland to take him to Cleveland Clinic, while Transplant House staff did the same for Lizz when she arrived, five hours into Jerry's transplant.

"We were graced by the help of friends throughout," says Lizz. Transplant House friends, Melissa and Mike, drove in from New York because they knew very well, the need for support. "Probably the most beautiful words I have heard during this journey were in a message on my cell phone—one that I'll never, ever erase—surgeon Koji Hashimoto described the liver as 'beautiful.' When he came out to the lobby to talk to me, he said it was 'perfect.' You can't ask for anything more."

Lizz and Jerry returned home to California and to daughters, Ari and Alex, in May, 2018, eight months after the Cleveland part of their journey began. ***They are more grateful than words can express, as they find their "new normal," and live each day in awareness that a perfect stranger, a donor, somewhere, gave Jerry new life, and through his/her giving, kept this family together.***

Transplant House of Cleveland

Bittersweet: Lizz and Jerry watched Ari's college graduation (in CA) by live stream, from the hospital.