

Announcer: Welcome to the Vets First Podcast, a research-based conversation centered around the VA health care system, its services, and patients. From Iowa City, Iowa, here's your hosts: Dr. Levi Sowers and Brandon Rea.

Levi: Welcome back to the Vets First Podcast. I'm Dr. Levi Sowers, with me, as always, is Brandon Rea.

Brandon: Hello, everyone.

Levi: Today, we're on our sixth episode. I didn't think we were gonna make it this far but, kicking and screaming, here we come. Today, we are going to continue the kidney transplant discussion that we started in episode five. We have two pretty exciting interviews today, the first is a father-son pair, David and Vince. David is the son who will be donating a kidney to his father Vince, who is a Veteran. And we're able to catch them before they have their kidney transplant and actually about two days before their surgery, which was pretty neat to hear, and get their experience from them directly.

Brandon: Our second interview today is with Veteran Jack Jones, who was part of a pretty historic event. He was the first Veteran at the Iowa City VA Healthcare System to receive a Hep-C positive kidney with the new program headed by Dr. Christie Thomas, who we'll hear on the next episode.

Levi: Jack Jones is part of a program here at the Iowa City VA Healthcare System where kidneys that are Hep-C positive are able to be transplanted into Veterans. It's the first in the nation to do such a thing. It's a really interesting, cool, program because we now have the ability to cure Hep-C in people. It has allowed this program to take kidneys that would have normally been wasted, and give them to Veterans who are very deserving of such kidneys. And so he'll be the second interview you hear today, and he's the first person in the U. S., possibly in the world, to receive a Hep-C positive kidney, and that was done right here at the Iowa City VA.

(music interlude)

Levi: Welcome back to that first podcast, today we're lucky to have Vince and his son David, who are kind of a unique pair. Vince is Air Force Veteran of eight years, and he is going to be a recipient of a kidney transplant from his son David, and also joining us are Darlene and Jennifer, their caregivers and of course Brandon is always with me, per the usual and welcome thanks guys are really appreciate you coming here and talking to us about this.

Guests: Our pleasure.

Levi: So first things first, Vince, how did you get into the Air Force? Where did you grow up at?

Vince: I grew up in, well I was born in Michigan, but then I moved to California. We lived in New Mexico, and moved to Alaska in '78.

Levi: All over the place.

Vince: All over the place.

Levi: That's cool, so how did you end up joining the Air Force?

Vince: I didn't want to continue going to school from college from there, and I just had it, and I just wanted to get in the Air Force.

Levi: And what year did you join the Air Force?

Vince: 1955.

Levi: Yeah that's cool.

Vince: And got out in 1963.

Levi: So you were in a relatively peace time, at that time correct? Was that during Korea?

Vince: No, it was after Korea, and just starting in Vietnam...and I was right in that era, but I wasn't in Vietnam.

Brandon: Where were you stationed at?

Vince: My tech school was in Illinois- in Rantoul, Champaign-Urbana just above that, and I was stationed for a short time in Lincoln, Nebraska, I was stationed in Sondrestrom, Greenland and then Castle Air Force base in California.

Levi: Wow, that's crazy, you've been all over the place!

Vince: Yeah I know.

Levi: So how long have you been seeking care from the VA?

Vince: Probably about eighteen years now.

Levi: Oh, wow. So is it all relatively related to kidney issues?

Vince: No, just general stuff- for general check-ups and stuff. Actually, that's about it. The only major thing is this.

Levi: Yeah, so, Vince is here, obviously, for a kidney transplant, and when did you first start noticing that you had a problem with your kidneys? Or what took place?

Vince: Yeah. Well, that was when I found out about two years ago, two and a half years ago, is when I my blood work was starting to show the kidney functions were elevated, and something to call back on, well it gets to the point I have a certain type, I have it's called polycystic and it's hereditary. We've tried to find out, my immediate family, including grandparents and stuff none

of them had, but a great uncle on both sides had it, which I never knew them anyway, and so that's probably where it came from.

Levi: Oddly enough I did my master's equivalent on polycystic kidney disease.

Vince: Is that right?

Levi: Yeah I wrote a huge proposal on it. I never worked on it but it's just like a proposal you have to do to pass, to be able to go on to get your PhD.

Vince: Fantastic!

Levi: Yeah, it's the most common form of hereditary...

Vince: Right! So you know all about it.

Levi: Yeah it was very genetic. So did you notice yourself getting sick at all? What prompted you to do the blood work? Was it just caught on a normal routine...

Vince: Well I have physicals anyway and that's when it started showing up, couple years ago or so. Said just keep an eye on it and it got to the point where my kidney functions were down to about ten percent well it's probably about five or six percent of use.

Levi: Are you on dialysis then?

Vince: I'm on dialysis.

Levi: When did you start that?

Vince: First of January, had a couple operations in my arm to put the fistula in there. So I've been doing that three times a week, four hours session.

Levi: How was that? What was it like to say, oh man my kidneys are going?

Vince: Well it gets to the point where you're not crazy about it, but that keeps you alive.

Levi: Yeah you know how did you guys feel?

David: By the time we found out, you know, he was already having problems and stuff, and he even mentioned you know yeah I'm never going to ask one of you guys if it runs in the family, and at first it was kind of a scary thing, wow I hope I'm okay.

Levi: Yeah absolutely.

David: And then I started thinking about it, and I thought, you know they're gonna check me out thoroughly. And that's when I said no, I'm going to step up, and hey I got a spare.

Vince: And they sent him here for evaluation, from Alaska.

David: And so here we are.

Levi: So you didn't even like, think about it. You're just like, if I can do this, I'm going to do it.

David: Yeah, automatically.

Vince: That's one of the things that, you don't ask someone, do you want to donate your kidney?

Levi: Yeah.

Vince: You don't do that. And it boils down to, you know, well what can you say your son? You look at him, tears coming down my eyes, and that's so all it has to be said.

Levi: Yeah, absolutely so, how did you guys come to this conclusion? So you knew you had bad kidney function, probably needed a transplant at some point. When did you find out that you would be able to actually give him a kidney?

David: It's been about a year.

Vince: Soon as they found out I had to go on dialysis, that's kind of the determining factor that it's getting down to nitty gritty.

David: Once the levels started going, and I started thinking about it more, and said, well we better get on this you know.

Levi: So what was the process like for you, to be able to become a donor?

David: Yeah all the different things, all kinds of testing, and lots of blood work, you know, lots of thinking.

Levi: Yes for sure.

David: You know and it's a good thing.

Levi: Yeah, it's really cool. It's really amazing.

David: A good thing you know anybody to donate a kidney, or whatever they make you know, people get eyes and whatever else. And he happened to need a kidney.

Vince: And our support is fantastic.

David: We want to do a little more fishing, you know.

Levi: (laughs) Yeah, you still got some years in ya?

David: Yeah.

Levi: That's cool. So you guys come all the way from Alaska, which is really interesting and you know, the University of Iowa in combination with the VA here's one of the kidney transplant centers for the VA and in the United States.

David: Yeah.

Levi: I'm not sure if they're the only one, or...

Vince: No, we had a choice.

Levi: So why'd you choose Iowa?

Caretaker 1: Well, they named off a few, and I thought Iowa was closest to Alaska. My geography is not that great, so it's probably not the closest one, but I'm glad we chose it. It's turned out to be the best.

Levi: Iowa is fantastic, so when you chose Iowa, what was the process? Did they fly you down here? Did the VA take care of that, and how did it work?

Caretaker 1: They did. They flew us down, they evaluated us, and they approved us.

Vince: Tell them about the other choices we had.

Caretaker 1: Birmingham, Alabama. Bronx, New York.

Levi: So Iowa was closest. Not to mention that you get the Midwest charm of it all too.

Vince: Yeah, we loved it the first time we got here, last August. I just love this place, it's just down to earth people.

Caretaker 1: There's an eagle soaring out the window.

(Group laughs)

Brandon: Of course, right. Dramatic?

Levi: When is your surgery?

Vince: Surgery is scheduled next Monday morning.

Levi: That's exciting. Are you nervous?

Vince: No.

David: No, everything's gonna be fine.

Vince: He's got a positive attitude.

David: They've got.

Levi: So, when you were coming around to deciding to give your dad a kidney, were you scared to do that?

David: A little bit yes.

Levi: Can you talk a little bit about that? Coming to that decision is going to be difficult.

David: Yeah you have to think about it, you know, I was- a lot of times. I was worried about if I was going to have the same kind of thing that he had. You know and so it was a little bit frightening, but then as I thought about it, I thought, well they're gonna check me out thoroughly, you know, and if mine's good, then I'm going to do it.

Levi: Yeah because polycystic kidney disease I think, progresses relatively, I think it *can* progress relatively slowly.

David: Yet surely slow.

Levi: Yeah so, you can have it for years and years and years and not even know it.

David. Yeah, and by now they would have been able to see something.

Levi: Yes that's what I was gonna get at, is that you would probably know that you had it by now I don't know how old you are.

David: Yeah we went to, you know, symposiums and stuff to make sure that we were on, you know, and so I started studying everything about kidneys...and and we're ready to go.

Vince: We may not have your PhD but, boy we've learned a few things.

Levi: Hey, all my PhD means that I've spent too long in school, first off. And second, I just read a lot. I read a lot.

Vince: There you go.

Levi: But yeah you know so Darlene, what was it like- what is it like for you? What has your experience been with the whole process?

Darlene: From beginning to end, there is worry, there's stress, but, from beginning to end, our support system has been phenomenal.

Levi: Who is your support system?

Darlene: Our kids, our family, our neighbors, our relatives. It's been fantastic. It makes all the difference.

Vince: We have a big family, lot of support.

Levi: That's fantastic.

David: So, it definitely makes it easier.

Levi: Yeah and how about Jennifer, and what has your experience been with at all? Like, were you really worried? Because when your kidneys start to fail, the first thing is like, oh man I could die right for instance.

Vince: Right.

Levi: They're absolutely critical for survival, so were you guys worried?

Jennifer: In the beginning we were worried, we weren't sure he was going to *want* to do dialysis so we...

Levi: Are you stubborn, are you a stubborn guy?

Vince: No, not necessarily stubborn I just...my quality of life, I mean we're movers, we do stuff.

Levi: Yeah yeah.

Vince: You know, and just thinkin' being in there three days a week, and god knows how long.

Levi: Absolutely yeah.

Vince: So as soon as he jumped in, the whole thing changed my opinion but, no I just would hang on long as I just felt it was necessary.

Levi: You got grandkids at all?

Vince: Yeah yeah. Yeah we've got a mess of kids.

David: They're probably texting you right now.

Levi: Yeah so you said there's a lot of worry involved?

Jennifer: There was, but the more I learned about it, I went to one of the symposiums with them.

Levi: What's imposing the to go to? May I ask?

Darlene: The kidney foundation.

Levi: Where was that at?

Jennifer: Anchorage

Levi: Are you guys from anchorage?

Jennifer: Mmhmm

Levi: okay that's really cool so, yeah you know, this this is something that we hope, as researchers that we can get across is that there are ways that you can educate yourself about whatever is going on, polycystic kidney disease you found, I think it's really really cool you guys took the time to find something like this and then go to it, and the kidney foundation is a fantastic foundation. You know there's all sorts of foundations for everything under the sun but you know I really encourage patients to do that sort of homework which is really cool.

David: And there were people there who were donors.

Vince: You get a lot of first hand information.

David: And they let us know what we're looking at. It was really nice to hear what they have to say too

Vince: You know what's really important is to have that support. Like these two.

Levi: That's great! Well guys I really want to thank you for coming on today. I think this has been a really special recording, at least for me I think it's a really neat experience.

### *Musical Transition*

Brandon: We just heard from David and Vince and now we're going to hear from Jack Jones.

Levi: Welcome back to the Vets first podcast. Today we have Jack Jones and his wife Martha, they're from North Carolina and Jack is the first Hep-C positive kidney transplant done at the VA, and he was in the navy from nineteen seventy five to nineteen seventy nine. Welcome, Jack. Welcome, Martha. It's really great to have you guys here. Thanks for agreeing to talk to us and of course Brandon is with us as usual.

Brandon: Hi Everyone.

Levi: So I think the first question I really like to ask Veterans is, where'd you grow up at?

Jack: I grew up on the coast of North Carolina- New Bern, North Carolina. And out of high school, I went straight into the Navy.

Levi: You went straight into the navy out of high school, and what made you decide to join the navy?

Jack: My father had been in it.

Levi: Very cool so you felt like a sense of duty?



Jack: Yeah I feel like that, and also I feel that I can see a lot more, different countries, and different ports in the navy.

Levi: Well fantastic! And so when you first signed up, did you sign up for a five year class?

Jack: Four years active, two years inactive.

Levi: Oh, that's excellent. So what was your role in the navy?

Jack: I was a boiler operator.

Levi: Okay can you explain a little bit about what that means?

Jack: I was at the bottom of the ship. The ship has to have steam to go anyway at any given time. And we had to keep the boiler on line. So I was down there in the boiler room, doin' that. I mean, I was a watch, watching different equipment to make sure it stayed up to par. I was even down there when they had a fire. They had a fuel line bust. Three hundred fifty pounds of pressure at a flashpoint. All I heard was a roar and I run around the board and I could see a fire coming to me and I ran to the stairs and ran up. As I ran up, the first step; it was black from smoke. When I reached the second step, I stepped on a fella. I reached down and grabbed a handful of hair with one hand, I couldn't see him, and I went up the third step dragging him with me.

Levi: Did he get hurt from the...?

Jack: He had fell coming across the second story deck plates which were aluminum, and they were meltin' and he fell and the whole side of his face, and his arm, were all solid metal. So I don't know what he got after that, after they took him off ship.

Levi: How are you able to shut it off?

Jack: Well, you can turn it off from different valves.

Levi: Was at the most excitement you had while you were in?

Jack: That was too much excitement. It's not a good sort of excitement.

Levi: Yeah, I understand that.

Jack: Well down there you do water sides and you got to go in the mud drum when the boiler's down, and you have to clean every pipe, run a hose with a grinder through it. I was on detail when we had fresh water tanks started leaking, and everybody on the ship, had to be stayed the bathroom. And we had to go in there and redo those tanks, ship 'em all out, repair 'em, and paint 'em all back. I got a commendation letter from the captain of the ship, and the admiral. I was always on the Admiral's ship.

Wife: He was stationed in Gaeta, Italy for a year and four months, and I went with him.

Jack: It was cool. I enjoyed that.

Levi: Yeah that would have been pretty neat. So you got to see some of the world after all?

Jack: A lot of it.

Levi: That's really neat. So after the military, when did you start seeking services at the VA?

Jack: I would say I got out in seventy nine so I would say probably eighty...four or five, something like that.

Levi: You know I think there is this overarching idea that the Vietnam Veterans did not have a good experience with the VA. How has your experience been?

Jack: I have never had a problem with em. When I first started with the VA they were a little on the slow side, but it progressively got better. Right now you can't ask for a better place to go. I mean I can get seen faster at the VA, than I would at a regular hospital.

Levi: I think it's definitely improved a lot. So you know you're here obviously for a kidney transplant, can you tell me a little bit about how you came to need a kidney transplant?

Jack: I was a diabetic okay and my doctor at the VA hospital told me I was having trouble with my kidneys. And he said when I got down to twenty percent, you can get on a kidney list. So I'm a squeaky wheel, everybody's gonna know if I'm in the room, bar none.

(Group laughs)

Jack: I told him, I said, let's get on the list when I get down to twenty. Well I went to Pittsburgh and I got on the list at the VA.

Levi: When was this?

Wife: Yeah this was in 2015.

Jack: That's what I was thinking.

Levi: Like how did you really know, were just going to normal checkups and you start noticing?

Jack: I was going to normal checkups in the diabetes clinic, and they start to seein' the levels goin' down and that's when they put me in with the nephrologist and in the process started telling me about, his name's Dr. Jack Work. He started telling me that my creatinine level was going down. Well it's really... they tell you, you can do a little bit about it, but boy they ain't. When you eat, I tried to do what they'd say, but I'm not a vegetarian.

Levi: (laughs) Either am I. Growing up in Iowa you definitely eat a lot of meat.

Jack: I eat a lot of deer meat too.

Levi: Oh nice, you're a hunter?

Jack: Yeah.

Levi: Very cool! I hunt as well.

Jack: I killed ten deer with a crossbow.

Levi: Oh so you get to crossbow hunt down there?

Jack: Yes. Anybody can now.

Levi: I think you have to have a reason, like a handicap reason first.

Jack: Yeah, it used to be that there, but now anybody can. I got a hundred sixty pound bow. So if he's a hundred yards or less, I know I'm gonna hit him.

Brandon: That's impressive.

Levi: Yeah that's cool. What are the deer like down there? Are they small?

Jack: You've got bigger deer.

Levi: We got a hundred and sixty five, scored a one sixty, no one ninety six on a fourth. It was the fifth biggest non-typical in the state of Iowa a few years ago, it was amazing. I didn't get it.

Jack: Sometimes we get an eight or ten, sometimes eleven or twelve. As far as their weight goes, their average weight is not going to be over two twenty. I know a lot of guys who come up here and hunt and they say it's nothing to do a two sixty, two eighty.

Levi: Yeah, it's pretty common.

Jack: That'd be like me shootin' a calf.

(Group Laughs)

Levi: I have a farm down in southern Iowa. We have like five hundred acres and we hunt like a lot down there. So anyway your diabetes started affecting your kidneys.

Jack: It was getting worse.

Brandon: How long were you on the list?

Jack: I got on the list...

Wife: September 29th, 2015.

Jack: And on March the eighth I got a kidney, or I got called.

Levi: March 8th of this year?

Jack: Yeah so what happened was, in September of last year. They finally, after arguing with Pittsburgh, I wanted to get dual listed with the VA, they finally said okay, they sent me a letter that said you can get dual listed.

Levi: What does dual listed mean?

Jack: Dual listed means I'm already with one VA hospital that means I go with a second. Because otherwise you're just on that one list. And that's not enough for me, like I said, I'm a squeaky wheel, they're gonna know I want a kidney. So in between that I went to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, on the civilian side and got on their list, so I was on two. In September I came here, had a great experience with 'em.

Levi: Yeah, why'd you choose Iowa?

Jack: I chose Iowa because I talked to the doctors in the Charles George VA Center, the nephrologist.

Wife: In Nashville.

Jack: And they said, they had a few kidneys transplanted up here with patients, and that everybody had nothing but good stuff to say about them.

Levi: Great.

Jack: It sounded like a good reason to me. They recommended the doctors and everything here. I said that sounds good. So I came up here in September. I went through their whole program. Everything went great. They said they'd let me know. They know everything so they knew that I had Hep C before, and in January, Dr. Katz, from here, called me. Well I had called them really, and he said I want to talk to you too. He answered my question. He says now, I know that you were Hep C before, and I knew immediately what he was gonna say, and that you were cured. I said, "Yes sir." He said, "I've been having a little trouble getting Hep C kidneys transplanted". He said, "would you take one?". I said, "Right now! You got one, I'll be there". I said get the plane ready. He said, not yet.

(group laughs)

Jack: I told him I had already talked to Mike at the VA center in Nashville. He was over at the gastroenterology and hepatology section. And I said, I've already talked to Mike, he says that, no problem, he can cure it again. He said uh, "It sounds like you know what's going on". I said, "Probably know a little more than you do about it right now". I said, I've really been checking it out. He said, sounds great. He said, I'll be callin' you. Well that was the end of January. On March the eighth, at 11:53, Lindsey called me, the coordinator here, she said, "Hello Mister Jack, how you doing?" I said, "Darlin' I'd be doing good if you told me..."

Brandon: Got some good news coming my way?

Jack: She said, I do, but it's Hep C. I said, that don't bother me. Are you gonna check the kidney out? She said, "yes." She told me that it was a prisoner that had died and you need to take a look at your own views on that. I said as long as it checks out I'm good. We left at 2:30. Well, we got to the actual airport at 2:30 and they pulled in with a prop plane that only had six seats in it: co-pilot and pilot took care of two of them and there was nobody else but us on it. They flew us straight to Iowa City, Iowa not Cedar Rapids. They had a limousine waitin' on us at the airport. They drove us down to Hartland to the motel and then to here. Well, when I got here they immediately started prepping me in the ICU. Everybody in the ICU, everybody in the hospital, has been outstanding! Their food is good, their response - you can mash their button - is great. About 7:20, I was getting a kidney that next morning. She says Dr. Katz come out after the surgery, what did he tell you?

Martha: He said, "your husband got a real good lookin' kidney!"

Levi: That's great.

Brandon: That's a great turnaround.

Levi: Do you guys have any kids?

Jack: Oh yeah.

Martha: Two!

Levi: So, Martha, what was it like for you during this whole process? Were you nervous? Were you excited?

Martha: Well, I was just worried about him and worried about the kids because I didn't want him to die. I thought he was, well, he wouldn't fit in the grave. And him getting a Hep C kidney, that was good news to me because I knew it could be cured if it was Hep C.

Jack: And the dialysis is just something to prolong your life.

Levi: No, that's true. Were you on dialysis?

Jack: I was on dialysis for 2 years and 7 months. Two fifteen-gauge needles in my arm every other day - Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday. Regardless, you're in there four and a half hours, normally. If you've got too much fluid on, which I did a lot of the times. 32 ounces a day of fluid - that's anything liquid at room temperature - that's all you can have. It's not good. Could you imagine that?

Brandon: Nope, nope, nope.

Levi: That would not be good.

Jack: It wasn't good for me. I had to go from drinking a pot of coffee a day down to a half a cup.

Brandon: Oh, I don't know if I can do that.

Jack: Trust me, if it means your life...

Brandon: That's true- that's true!

(Group Laughs)

Jack: So they'd stick me with the needles and, thankfully, the VA gave me the lidocaine to go to my arm. When I finally got the kidney, I went back and I saw the people at the dialysis center. They were sort-of like an extended family - I saw them three days a week for two years and seven months. I knew them about as good as they knew me! But, uh, getting back to this place...I went down to the main floor after ICU and they told me that, if you can walk, you can do better. They didn't know who they were talking to.

(Group Laughs)

Jack: I was used to walking two point four miles a day, with her.

Martha: Yeah.

Jack: In ICU, I walked twenty five times around that clinic the day after the surgery. When I got down to the main floor, I was walking all the time; I'd walk three or four times a day. They see me on a walk at 10:30 or 11 o'clock at night, I'm a coon hunter. They asked, "Why ain't you asleep?" and I said, "I gotta walk!"

[Group Laughs]

Jack: And so it really helped me do a little better for being sore - which is why we were here three weeks...and a half. They gotta get all of your meds straightened out and all of that. That took a little while and I did have one problem, my mouth. You see people in the old cowboy shows? They're out in the desert, their horse is dead, they throw the canteen away and they've got no more water and their mouth is all cracked? Theirs look good compared to mine. That's no joke. They tried everything here for relief and never did find the right combination. It took 4 and a half to 5 weeks for it to just finally work its way out.

Levi: Did you immediately notice the difference with the new kidney?

Jack: Immediately, yes, my output was great, and that's no joke.

Levi: Did you feel better?

Jack: Yes, started feeling better -well, when you go to the restroom, you're not there thirty minutes trying to do this or this. I mean, I could blow the back of the toilet off.

(Group Laughs)

Martha: He only stayed in the hospital five days and then he moved on to the motel room with me for the rest of the time.

Jack: I don't call it my "new kidney". I call it my "new-to-me kidney," it's like a new scar.

Levi: One question asked I've been asking all the kidney transplant patients, you can feel free to not answer this, is how's it feel to have another person's organ in your body?

Jack: Very appreciative.

Levi: Yeah, I think that's generally the feeling.

Martha: We wrote a letter to the donor family, thanking them. I know it's hard for them.

Levi: Absolutely.

Jack: But someday, it's possible, someday I wouldn't mind meeting them and just telling them in person how appreciative I am.

Levi: You just definitely gave me goosebumps, man. So, with that, I think we're going to end for today and I'd like to thank everybody for listening to the Vets First Podcast and really thank Jack for his time in the service and congratulate him on his new kidney! It's really, really, exciting and cool-

Jack: My "New-to-me" kidney.

Levi: "New-to-you" kidney! Yes, well, thank you very much!

Announcer: This concludes today's Vets First Podcast. For questions or comments relating to the program, please direct email correspondence to [vetsfirstpodcast@gmail.com](mailto:vetsfirstpodcast@gmail.com). Thanks for listening!