

## Dan & Deb Kealing

### COPD



**Dan:** I was first diagnosed with emphysema in 2006 at age 55, while in the hospital with a bout of pneumonia. Even before the hospital stay, I knew something was wrong. For many years my wife and I had run 10k races, and even managed a couple of half marathons. We golfed together, travelled, and managed to keep up with two active boys. But the last couple of years before the pneumonia, I had slowed down and quit running because I couldn't handle even small hills without getting short of breath.

It took several months to get my strength back, but my lungs had suffered a significant amount of damage. At the time, we owned a flooring store. My wife Debi took care of sales, and I supervised our installers and made the rounds to job sites. I found I could no longer get upstairs or lift any amount of weight and I slowly became deskbound. Looking back, this was probably the beginning of Deb becoming my caregiver.



**Deb:** My mother was also diagnosed with emphysema, eventually having complications which ended her life. I told myself that she had been sedentary, but Dan was active. I never thought I would be a caregiver.

**Dan:** Golf has always been very important to me. I love everything about it, the competition, the exercise, the comradery, and the fact it's the only sport I've found that I was pretty good at.

After I started needing oxygen to exercise in July 2017, I continued to play golf. I tried everything to make it work, from wearing a small tank in a fanny pack, to carrying a tank from the cart to the shot and sitting it behind me, to trying to take the cannula out and walking to the shot and walking back to the cart to replace it. By June of 2018, I finally had to give up golf entirely. For me this was a mental disaster. My anxiety and depression from

having this disease had been kept somewhat at bay because of golf but was now free to run rampant.

In July of 2018, I decided to seek out a psychologist to get some help with the anxiety and depression. The psychologist didn't do much for me, but he did suggest a personal trainer who worked at a major health club to help replace the exercise I lost when I quit golf.

The trainer, Laryn, eagerly accepted me as a new student. I'll never forget the first day of walking into this bustling health club, oxygen tank in hand and saying, "I have never felt so out of place in my life." She assessed what I could and couldn't do on that first visit, and also asked a lot of questions about emphysema. She admitted she knew nothing about it. On my next visit, I was amazed that she had done some extensive research and had a good grasp of the physical challenges I faced. She set up a combination cardio and weightlifting program, we agreed to bi-weekly appointments, and with her optimistic yet firm guidance I made slow but steady progress. She gave me purpose. Just as important, I got positive feedback from others working out and felt a sense of belonging. Laryn has been an integral and important part of my care team. Even after the gym was closed due to COVID-19, she continued to correspond by text. And now that she has been vaccinated and I've recovered from a recent exacerbation, she comes to the house once every two weeks to work with me.

**Deb:** Laryn is a blessing for both of us. She not only works with Dan; she also is my trainer. She has challenged me mentally and physically. I have never been an advocate of meditation, so she suggested yoga, which became part of my weekly workouts. During COVID-19, the gym closed but she found outdoor places where we could still workout. She is instrumental in helping me take care of myself, something difficult to remember to do as a caregiver.

**Dan:** By 2010 I was on disability, and we had closed the store. Deb found a full-time job and I tried to keep up with the simple chores around the house, like laundry and making the bed. Bigger chores like vacuuming or mopping were already beyond me.

**Deb:** Our journey has taken us from oxygen only at night, to portable oxygen concentrators, to oxygen 24/7 with tanks, to medications with a nebulizer. What holds all this together for me is that Dan is a fighter, always researching improvements for this disease.

In March of 2021, Dan suffered a severe exacerbation that required hospitalization. I was nervous, anxious, and fearful. Each day the doctors were increasing the dosage of the steroids and antibiotics. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, I was able to visit each day but could not stay overnight. The doctors said they were doing all they could. On day five I walked into his room and thought I was going to be planning a funeral.

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There was an enormous flood of emotions, like sadness, helplessness, and anger. I had to remind myself to be brave in front of him. When I got home that night, I cried and cried. I thought I was going to lose him. Overnight, the medications started working and I was surprised that day I walked into his room and saw the change. I was so happy. Two days later, he was discharged.

**Dan:** After those eight days in the hospital because of the exacerbation, I came home weaker and shorter of breath than ever. Recovery is never to one hundred percent of where I was before an exacerbation. Without Debi, I can't cook, do laundry, take a shower, go to the grocery, or make it to a doctor's appointment.

My quality of life is immeasurably better with my loving wife as my caregiver. Without her I don't know how I would survive, particularly with the pandemic.

**Deb:** Little by little this disease continues to impact our quality of life. I no longer work full time, and do contract work instead. Even small daily activities are difficult for Dan, and difficult for me, as I can only listen and support him as he describes how challenging a simple task can be. As there are now more bad days than good, emotions are a roller coaster. Exacerbations become more frequent, and make you feel helpless. Anger surfaces with equipment failures. Power outages are exhausting and scary. Learning to be a liaison between the doctor and the pharmacy for prescriptions is exasperating. Tears flow some days just as a release of the weight of watching your loved one go through each day. This is our journey, and we are going through it together. ●

## Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) is a preventable and treatable lung disease. People with COPD must work harder to breathe, which can lead to shortness of breath and/or feeling tired. Some other facts about COPD are:

- Although the most common cause of COPD is tobacco smoke, there are several other factors that can cause or make COPD worse, including environmental exposures and genetic (inherited) risk.
- Common symptoms of COPD include feeling short of breath while resting or when doing physical activity, cough, wheezing, fatigue, and/or mucus production that does not go away.
- Some general classes of medications to treat COPD include those that aim to widen the airways (bronchodilators), reduce swelling in the airways (antiinflammatory drugs, such as steroids), and/or treat infections (antibiotics).

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