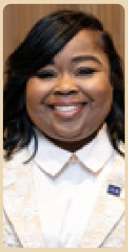
TURNING TRIALS INTO TRIUMPH

A Journey with Kidney Disease



By Alethea Walls,
DPC Board Member

I've learned that living with kidney disease doesn't mean life stops - it just means you learn to live it differently.

My journey with kidney disease began at just 14 years old. I was diagnosed with rapidly progressive glomerulonephritis (RPGN), and my life changed overnight. While most teenagers were navigating high school and part-time jobs, I was learning about my treatment options. I started with peritoneal dialysis, then transitioned to hemodialysis. Each option came with its own adjustments, but I wasn't going to let this stop me. As soon as I turned 16, I got my first job and never stopped pushing forward. At one point, I was working 30 hours a week while balancing life with a chronic condition.

Right before I turned 19, I received my first kidney transplant. It was a moment of hope and a new kind of treatment altogether, but that transplant only lasted two years. I struggled with treatment compliance, trying desperately to feel "normal." That experience shaped me and ignited my passion for helping others, especially young patients. Understanding the importance of self-advocacy and consistent care is so critical, no matter which treatment path you're on. I began mentoring others through their own transitions into adulthood, teaching them that "normal" doesn't have to look like anyone else's version – whether you're on peritoneal dialysis, hemodialysis, or managing a transplant.

Later, my aunt stepped forward as a living donor and gave me my second kidney. It was a blessing that renewed my sense of purpose. I became a dialysis technician and eventually a preceptor, helping train the next generation of techs with an emphasis on patient-centered care. I knew the clinical side, and I knew the patient side. I understood how different treatment modalities worked because I was living both experiences.

But even with that second transplant, my kidneys began to fail again. I had to return to dialysis – this time, only in-center treatment was available to me initially, and I spent a month in the hospital. I was managing it while juggling multiple jobs and pursuing my love of hairstyling. Then came the Covid-19 pandemic - and with it, a devastating misdiagnosis that I had two years to live due to suspected multi-organ failure.

But God had other plans.

The diagnosis was later reversed, and I emerged with a renewed sense of gratitude and mission. Today, I'm back on dialysis and listed for another kidney transplant in Washington, D.C. I've been on dialysis for nearly 11 years this time. I continue to visit dialysis centers across metro Detroit, offering comfort, education, and reassurance to patients who, like me, have felt overwhelmed and alone. Many adults, especially after diagnosis, are scared and unsure about which treatment option is right for them. They're not always given the education they need about what's available. I advocate for them now, helping them understand their choices – just as I once did for younger patients.

In 2024, I was honored to be a DPC Patient Ambassador. I traveled to Washington, D.C., to share stories from the patient community, including my own, with lawmakers. That experience inspired me to run for a seat on the DPC Board of Directors, where I now proudly serve. Being elected to the board is one of the proudest moments of my life. I now walk in the footsteps of so many incredible patient leaders and carry their voices - alongside my own - into the rooms where decisions are made.

Through every high and low, I've learned that kidney disease doesn't define me. It fuels me. Every day I show up - to advocate, to educate, to comfort others - and to remind them that even through setbacks and transitions between different treatments, there's always a way forward.

I'm not just surviving. I'm living, giving, and proving that hope is always possible.