

# DIAMONDS FROM COLE



I will never forget Valentine's Day of 2003. Such a special day, not because I received a box of chocolates. What I was given was better than that!

It was on that chilly February day that I received supplemental oxygen, an E tank and a concentrator. I didn't know it was better at the time. It was during the holidays in 2002 that I experienced the blood pressure spike that resulted in a telling stress test. My hands turned blue, which indicated that I had a pulmonary problem. My primary doctor made a COPD diagnosis after a pulmonary function test, CT scan, and cardiac ultrasound. My FEV1/FVC ratio was 53%, qualifying me as having moderate obstruction, primarily bullous emphysema, a diffusion problem, and a little ventilation / perfusion mismatch that made moving a challenge at the 5500 ft. altitude in my Denver home.

Within a day of using the supplemental oxygen I had back all of my lost energy. It was thrilling. I was no longer sleepy all day or exhausted by small exertions. I studied to gain knowledge about my disease and how to manage it. I found several tools to help me, including a combination of pharmaceutical products that was right for me. They worked wonders on my airways and reduced the amount of air trapping in my lungs. I started walking before beginning pulmonary rehabilitation in early March. It was very difficult at first because I had been decreasing my activity for over a year and my muscles were very weak.

Rehab is responsible for my dedication to exercise seven days a week. Through a program with a treadmill at home and the treadmill, recliner step machine, exercycle and small weights at the rehab clinic, I made a lot of progress. My increased muscle efficiency isn't enough to get me off oxygen, but my muscles were brought back from being very weak.

My husband bought me a pulse oximeter to use while exercising. The instrument reassured me that I was maintaining a safe blood oxygen saturation level, or, it told me to increase the oxygen flow (per medical instructions). Dr. Tom Petty says, "Titrate as you migrate," or that oxygen flow should be adjusted during movement. My blood oxygen saturation can drop like a rock and since I don't feel the sensation of being short of breath, like many other patients, only the oximeter can tell me for sure.

I was not an athlete before diagnosis, but fell in love with exercise events when our rehab group participated in a fundraising event in the fall of 2003. We walked a 1 kilometer distance. I felt ALIVE! I decided the next year I would complete the 5k event. And in the fall of 2004, there I was, pulling my oxygen tank, set on high flow, on an old golf bag cart. I continued to grow stronger, completing two 5k events in 2005.

Certainly not many 68 year olds find themselves becoming hooked on participating in athletic events. Yes, my exercise is extreme, but anyone without other serious health issues can do it through rehab training if they want to. It only takes the ability to walk steadily for an hour. My hero, Mark Mangus, R.R.T., encouraged me to keep moving, saying "any age, any stage" can benefit from exercise.

I attended the 2006 Long Term Oxygen Therapy Conference, where medical professionals from all areas of the respiratory care arena came together to discuss oxygen therapy. I was particularly inspired by the superb presentations made by Mary Burns and Doctors Tom Petty, Brian Tiep and Richard Casaburi. These top medical professionals kindled my desire to complete a 10k. A good friend, also using supplemental O2, convinced me I could do a half marathon.

I participated in many events during 2006, moving my oxygen along with me in a baby jogging stroller. Lungs à la carte, as I called the set-up. About halfway through the year I began needing more oxygen for my exertion level at the high altitude, so I started looking into transtracheal oxygen delivery. After a lot of consideration I decided that transtracheal was the way to



go, and I was certainly right. I personally think this is a superior method of oxygen delivery. It involves a tube that goes directly into my trachea through a hole in my neck instead of into my nose with a cannula and hose. I don't miss the sore nose and ears and the tubing getting in the way at all.

Throughout 2006, I completed two 5k events, one 10k event, two half marathon events and a stair climb event in a 47 story building. Every moment of those 38.6 miles and 1,014 steps was a thrill. As a former YMCA Aquatics Director I missed swimming so near the end of the year I began experimenting with floating objects I could use to hold my oxygen while swimming. Eventually I found the floating pool cooler (pictured) I use now.

Recently the Sportswomen of Colorado awarded me with the Swede Johnson SPIRIT award. SPIRIT, not speed, is what it is all about. I challenged the odds and improved my PFT test numbers significantly. Years later, my ratio is 3% higher than it was in the first test I had. In fact, my FEV-1, FVC, residual volume, and air trapping have all improved.

I would advise all of you to try to improve your situation with exercise too. Compete with yourself. Do better, feel better. Keep moving. The more you do, the more you can do. Have your medical team guide you. Set your own personal goal and move a little bit more every day any which way you can... it adds up to better breathing and living. ☀



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