

NO EXCUSES

Jay Black faces familiar medical complications like those he experienced before his kidney transplant in 2000

by: Grace Logan



Wide receiver coach Jay Black stands on the NW football field May 4. In spite of medical complications, Black plans to coach this summer and next fall. “At one time I just kept thinking ‘six months,’ and now here I am six months later. This summer in August, I thought it was over. With the way I’m feeling now and the way I’m gaining back weight again, I told Bo Black that he can count on me to coach next year.”

Jay Black lies alone in a hospital room. The buzz of the fluorescent light is only momentarily drowned out by each rhythmic beep of the heart monitor.

Beep, buzz. Beep, buzz. Beep, buzz.

A foot-long incision from the base of his abdomen to his ribcage is held together by surgical glue. Tubing protrudes from the opening in his right side. It is working to drain any blood that may escape Black’s arteries – arteries that had just been fused with Cheryl Willems’ kidney.

Black is thirsty. He rolls his head to the left to see his water and begins to reach. His fingertip grazes the side of the cup.

He tries again. It’s just barely out of reach.

Since the surgery on August 2, 2000, it’s been a few days and he hasn’t been able to move much. He hasn’t wanted to move much. Moving hurt – it hurt bad.

Outside Black’s room, Willems paces back and forth down the hallway. Today is the first day she can see Black in person. She wants to make sure that her kidney takes.

Willems walks into Black’s room, looks him up and down and half-jokingly says, “Get out of bed, Black. No excuses!”

“No excuses,” that was one of Black’s slogans while coaching football in Protection, Kansas.

“No excuses,” he lifts his head.

“No excuses,” he moves the bedspread.

“No excuses,” one foot on the floor.

“No excuses,” then the other.

A few months prior, the hand seizures began. Black’s fingers would lock up curled into a fist. From thumb to pinky, Black would pry each finger loose.

“Weird stuff starts to happen when your blood gets dirty,” said Black, a NW football coach and history teacher.

Next came the vomiting. Each hurl brought up more and more blood. At times, it was pure blood, and the amount made it look like he had cut himself open.

He thought it was a stomach ulcer, what else could it be?

He didn’t think about his dad’s high blood pressure or, even, his own high blood pressure.

He didn’t think about his grandma, who died while on dialysis for kidney-related complications. He didn’t think about his own kidneys.

So, when he finally went to the doctor and was asked: “Can you drive,” it came as a surprise. Of course he could drive, everything was going fine – he thought everything was going fine.

The doctor’s next words came quickly, too quickly:

‘Well...’ He said, ‘You’re in critical condition.’

Everybody at Protection High School in the 1990s knew Jay Black, and Cheryl Willems was far from an exception. Three of four of the Willems’ kids had Black as a coach, history teacher or both.

“The one word I would say about Jay Black is motivator,” Willems said. “It’s not something that just comes and goes. He has constant energy and continues to motivate from the first thing in the morning until whenever his players see the last football film at his house [that evening].”

In the halls or on the field, Black was always there for the Willems kids. Black had been Jaelyn Willems’ football, basketball and track coach.

So, when he showed up to watch Jaelyn’s All-Star football game on June 7th, 2000, it wasn’t a surprise. When Cheryl first saw him that night, she knew something was wrong. Critically wrong.

He had lost weight, his face was pale and he didn’t have the usual bounce in his step. But when she talked to him, he was still the old Jay Black – the coach who was always 100% behind her son and every boy out on the field.

He told Cheryl and her husband that he was receiving dialysis – a treatment that would filter out his blood, doing the work his kidney couldn’t do alone.

He told them that he was on a transplant list, waiting for a kidney.

During the car ride home, Cheryl looked at her husband and said, “I’m going to go get tested.” Her husband replied, “If you’re not a match, I’ll get tested too.”

The average lifespan of a kidney transplant is 20-25 years – it has been about 23 years since Black’s.

With Willem’s kidney, Black was able to continue coaching football and came to Northwest in 2015. He’s also been able to continue farming wheat. He’s been thinking about picking up golf. He loves steak and doesn’t like paperwork, especially the paperwork to file taxes.

“One of the misconceptions is that people think when you get a kidney transplant, you are automatically cured,” Black said. “[The transplant just] replaces dialysis.”

When Black is dehydrated, he can tell because his hands begin to seize up again. He has felt pain in his lower right abdomen, right where Willems’ kidney sits.

Last summer, Black’s health plummeted. He felt like he was freezing and his weight dropped to 123 pounds. He was certain Willems’ kidney was worn out.

“When I walked in last spring, Dr. Gruman was really worried about [Jay],” head football coach Bo Black said. “I

hadn’t seen him in a month and a half. I walked in the room and, if I were a betting man, I’d say this guy is going to be dead in a month, month and a half.”

Bo Black and Jay Black have been coaching together for over 20 years. Despite sharing a last name, there is no formal family tie. However, their friendship has held strong for years. The summer of Jay’s health decline, Bo was worried about him coaching throughout summer conditioning.

“I felt like I owed it to him, for him to be the one who tells me that he’s not going to be able to coach,” Bo said. “He sat out most of last year and I know that was really hard for him. When he made that decision, I really wasn’t sure that he’d ever be back. But I’ve always thought, [Jay Black’s] family is football.”

Since that summer, Jay has recovered, and he’s back at school. Now, he’s faced with a new choice: get another transplant, or go back on dialysis – neither of which he wants to do.

He was put back on the transplant list, but declared inactive due to other medical complications. His doctor told him he will probably need to go back on dialysis next year. He has been mapped for a new fistula to be placed in his left arm. The fistula is a tool used during dialysis that will allow Black’s blood to be filtered out of his system and replaced more easily.

“I got a nephew at home and some people that would probably offer [a kidney]. It’s just that, you know, I’m starting to get up there in age and stuff and...,” Black trailed off for a moment. “Anyway, I might have to look back at dialysis. As terrible as it is, I might have to get used to that.”

Cheryl Willems gave Jay Black the gift of life. He feels there is no right way to fully thank her. He knows she doesn’t want him to think of the kidney as having monetary value, but he wants to help her and the family.

Somehow.

Some day.

For now, he wants people to know he’s given this his all.

“I take pride in my little farm,” Black said. “I take pride in our football team. I take pride in the classroom. Maybe pride is not a good word, but I’m going to give you everything I got. 100%. I can always get better. There’s ways to get better.”



Smiling, Jay Black and his organ donor, Cheryl Willems, stand side by side. “Everyone in Protection, Kansas would have offered Jay Black their kidney,” Willems said. “I was just the lucky one who got to donate my own.”