

# The Tripartite Transplant: An Unexpected Journey

by BILL CORNELL

**W**ARNING: THIS ISN'T the sort of article you normally read in *The Construction User*. There are no tips on how to increase market share or train apprentices, and I don't have anything new to say about multiemployer pension reform. Instead, I want to tell you a true story – my story – about a life-and-death crisis and how it permanently changed my perspective on my career, my family...and on what's truly important in life. My hope is that it will change the way you think about these things, too.

I've been involved in union construction and maintenance for more than 30 years. Over that long span of time I have made many friends, both professionally and personally. I was fortunate to have a long and fruitful career at McCarl's, one of the country's leading union mechanical contractors. But in August of 2014, everything I had worked so hard for was put into jeopardy. After undergoing a bronchoscopy of my lungs, my doctor told me I had Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis as a result of my rheumatoid arthritis attacking my lungs. The only alternative in order for me to survive was that I would need a double lung transplant — if I was accepted after a weeklong evaluation to determine if I was strong enough medically, physically and emotionally.

I was immediately accepted to be placed on the transplant list and took a crash-course in organ donation. I was literally educating myself on how to survive. The more I learned, the more I realized that – crazily enough – the organ donation process had a lot in common with how our industry is structured! Our tripartite system of



cooperation between unions, contractors and owner-clients was actually a great analogy to understand how the donation process worked.

In this analogy, the owner is comparable to the donor. Just as the owner awards the job to the contractor, the donor is the person who gives the organ(s) to be transplanted. The contractor is similar to the donor's family; the contractor decides to move forward on a job, and likewise the donor family authorizes their loved one's organs to be removed. And finally, the union receives the actual work, just as the recipient has the privilege of receiving the life-saving organ. Together, all three parts of the transplant process must work together in harmony to ensure success – just like on union jobsites around the country.

So in a way, you could say my decades of experience in union construction had uniquely prepared me for this moment. I understood the importance of cooperation, because without it, I wouldn't have had a career. All those years spent in

tripartite meetings, seeking to find common ground between unions, contractors and owners, grew “muscles” that I didn't even know I had until faced with this health crisis. I'm not saying the transplant process was a walk in the park – not by a long shot! – but I really believe it would have been more difficult had I not spent the better part of my life focusing on finding ways to get the job done in tough circumstances.

## Rollercoaster Ride

The next several months were among the most difficult of my life. I was put on full-time oxygen on Labor Day 2014. Two months later, after a series of evaluations, I was approved for transplant. Great news – but then I was told that as part of the preparation, I had to have all of my teeth pulled before I could be placed on the transplant list! My teeth were removed the day after Thanksgiving, and I was officially listed for transplant.

After the physical stress on my body, I went through several rounds of mental and emotional stress. I endured three “false alarms” – occasions when I was told there was a suitable set of lungs for me, only to find out later that, for various reasons, the operation couldn't be performed. I was devastated by these constant setbacks and, frankly, thought I was going to die. But then on Christmas Day 2014, I received the best present possible – news that they had found a set of lungs and that this time, the transplant would move forward.

I underwent the transplant on December 26, 2014. It was successful, but there were complications. I

was allergic to the medication they gave me post-transplant to ensure that my body didn't reject the new lungs. I was finally released from the hospital on January 24, 2015. Believe it or not, three months later I walked 90 flights of stairs unassisted, and four months post-transplant, I rode an exercise bike for seven miles! Eight months later, I successfully completed a 5K walk for charity and placed third.

I had "made it." I got the happy ending I and my family so desperately wanted. But I soon realized my story wasn't really over. In fact, it had just begun. There are continuous hurdles to overcome and roadblocks which occur post-transplant but you have to push through them. The transplant experience had changed my outlook on life and work. I now had a new set of priorities.

### The Lucky One

Although I was extremely grateful for receiving a new set of lungs, I knew that I had been extremely lucky but I also have to give credit to God for blessing me with new lungs! During my research prior to my transplant, I learned that there are more than 120,000 candidates on the organ donation waiting list – and every 10 minutes, another name is added to that list. Twenty-one people die each day waiting for a transplant. Why? One reason is simple math. Although 90% of Americans support organ donation, only 50% are actually organ donors.

There are several reasons people don't become donors including many myths which are unfounded. For example:

1. **Doctors will not try to save my life if they know I am a registered donor.** This is false. Doctors take an oath to save every patient they can. They have an ethical commitment to save lives if possible.
2. **My religion does not support organ donation.** False, every major religion supports and encourages organ donation.
3. **I am too old to donate organs and tissues.** False; let the medical experts make that decision after you pass away.
4. **My family will be charged for donating my organs.** There is no charge to the family for organ donation.

Many people think the only way to register to become an organ donor is through their driver's license bureau. Actually, the fastest way is to go online to [www.registerme.org](http://www.registerme.org). It will take less than five minutes to register.

As I continue on my post-transplant journey I will make myself available to people in our industry to provide encouragement to people contemplating receiving a life-saving organ and also encourage other people to become registered organ donors. I am also available to give speeches to unions, contractors and trade organizations regarding my personal miracle story and to provide more education about organ donation.

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## Michael Pleasant Re-Elected NMAPC President and Labor Co-Chair

Michael Pleasant, Assistant General President of the United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipe Fitting Industry of the United States and Canada (UA), has been re-elected President of the National Maintenance Agreements Policy Committee, Inc. (NMAPC) and Labor Co-Chair of the NMAPC Labor-Management Committee.

NMAPC negotiates and administers the National Maintenance Agreements (NMA), a series of collective bargaining agreements utilized by more than 2,000 industrial contractor companies that employ members of fourteen building trades international unions. To date, the NMA Program has accounted for more than \$370 billion of work and well over 2 billion work-hours for the building trades and contractors.

Mr. Pleasant, who has served as NMAPC President and Labor Co-Chair since 2012, was re-elected to a third two-year term by the Committee on June 1.

"I am honored that the NMAPC Labor-Management Committee has once again placed its trust in me, and I look forward to continue leading our organization," Pleasant said. "Our primary goal remains unchanged: to ensure that the NMA Program delivers the highest quality service to the entire tripartite community comprised of labor, contractors and owner-clients. When the NMA Program succeeds, the entire industrial construction and maintenance industry succeeds."