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June 17, 2013

6/14/2013

Runner donates kidney, doesn't miss a beat

Shane McOwen
staff writer

Avondale resident Elizabeth Martinez had to accomplish her goal of running a marathon more quickly than anticipated.

Martinez, 29, completed the 26.2 mile run with a week to spare. The big hurry: She had to donate her kidney to her uncle.

"My family has a history of diabetes, and it took a toll on his kidneys," Martinez said. "He was diagnosed with kidney disease and at 20 percent function, he was eligible to be put on the donor list."

Martinez received an email sent out to her and her family asking for support for her uncle, Albert Mendoza of Phoenix. It didn't take any time for her to respond.

"It was a no-brainer for me," Martinez said. "Right away, I responded and wanted to see if I could help him."

Mendoza said he had been battling kidney disease for nearly three years and was starting to become very sick.

"My niece called and said she wanted to donate for me and wanted to see if she was a match," Mendoza said.

After initial testing, the two were a match and the process for the transplant began.

"I was a nervous wreck to be honest," Martinez said. "But I was more excited than nervous."

The successful surgery took place on the morning of April 30, and Martinez was told her first actions when waking up were asking on the status of her uncle.

"I woke up and they said the first thing I asked was how my uncle was doing," she said. "That was my main concern."

Mendoza spent a few more weeks in the hospital because of complications from the surgery, but has since recovered.

Martinez has also recovered and has recently been cleared to continue running.

Beat the Heat race

Martinez has been an avid runner for the past two years, and her family plans on joining her in her next race for support just a month and a half after surgery.

"Running is her passion, she loves to run," Mendoza said. "And I want to be there to see her through."



RUNNER ELIZABETH MARTINEZ sits outside her home May 28 in Avondale. Martinez, who recently donated a kidney to her uncle, will run in an upcoming 11k in Scottsdale. View photo by Michael Clawson

Martinez will have her uncle and her three children on the sidelines for the Beat the Heat race on June 22 at WestWorld in Scottsdale. She will be running an 11K, which is nearly seven miles.

"My uncle and kids are going to be there, it's going to be an emotional experience," Martinez said. "It's kind of a cherry on top of everything from getting out of my recovery and moving forward and having my uncle there."

Martinez was cleared by her doctors to begin running again May 28.

"I ran three miles, not at my normal fast pace that I wanted, but I'm just happy to be able to do that again and start training for my run," she said.

Martinez began running regularly two years ago, but previously ran cross country for her high school.

"I just wanted something for myself and a healthy way to relieve stress," Martinez said. "I was going through my divorce and separation, [plus] three kids, so finding something healthy to do to relieve stress and anxiety, running was it for me."

Since that time, Martinez estimates she's participated in about 30 races, and tries to compete in at least one per month.

Martinez was presented a medal from her family for running a marathon and for donating her kidney.

"I was training so hard for [the marathon], that I wanted to do it," she said. "I did it the week before the surgery just on my own, no cheering crowds, no water stations. It was empowering."

The medal has the runner's logo of a shoe with wings and engraved on the back is the phrase "I'm Different."

"My family says I'm different because not a lot of people would have donated a kidney," Martinez said. "For my marathon, they made it for me to remember it."

Martinez said the surgery provided an opportunity to finish plans she and Mendoza had made.

"We have plans to go fishing, to go camping, to go to the Grand Canyon," she said. "So I'm excited to bring that back to him, because he was in a lot of pain."

Mendoza said his recovery is coming along and he should be getting back to an active lifestyle soon.

"I'm getting a little bit stronger now and hopefully in a couple of days, I'll start walking myself," he said. "She's my little angel from above."

Martinez said she was happy to see her uncle feel better for the first time in years.

"I'm just waiting for him to call me and tell me he's ready for that hike or that fishing trip," Martinez said.

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