



# FROM DENIAL TO REVIVAL

## Liver Transplant Gives Jenn Hyden a Second Chance at Life

**Jenn Hyden** knows that in sharing her story, there are people who will judge her, insisting she brought her health problems upon herself. But Jenn, a Fargo resident, longtime NDSU Foundation staff member and an active member of the local theater community, also believes she's been given a second chance at life, and if sharing her story will help just one other person, she's willing to tell it.

Six years ago, Jenn's father, brother, best friend and father-in-law all died within six months of each other. Around the same time, Jenn went through a divorce and lost her home.

### **That's also when she started losing herself.**

"I went into a deep depression," she remarks. "All I pretty much did was drink. I didn't care, didn't want to be here. I wasn't coping with anything."

When she would come home at the end of the day, she would have a drink, then another until she was drinking about a liter of vodka every few days.

"It just became the new normal," she says. "As long as I was drinking, I was numb. I never dealt with the divorce, deaths or loss. I would drink so I didn't have to feel it."

**Drinking numbed the pain Jenn felt, but it did nothing to heal the brokenness within her.**

"I was limping along," she notes.

Eventually, drinking to forget about her grief became a habit – one that blinded her to her underlying depression and one that would nearly cost Jenn her life.

The only time she stopped drinking after work was when she was involved in stage managing plays.

"Theater gave me something else to focus on and enjoy," she explains. "I seemed happy, but it was also something else to numb me."

### **Turning Point**

Jenn felt tired all the time, but her sickness came on so gradually, she didn't realize anything was wrong until three years ago, when she started vomiting blood.

Multiple medical tests, scans, hospitalizations, emergency room visits and even a bone biopsy revealed she did not have cancer, but her iron, white blood cells, red blood cells and platelets were incredibly low. She didn't have a concrete answer for her sickness. One doctor made a passing comment about her drinking, but

Jenn didn't take it seriously.

**"I wasn't ready to hear that," Jenn admits. "I didn't think I had an issue. I didn't think my drinking was a big deal."**

In fact, most people had no idea Jenn even had an issue with alcohol.

"I was very, very functional," Jenn notes.

Then, a year and a half ago, Jenn was hospitalized for about a week because her feet and ankles had swollen up like balloons, and lab work revealed her platelet count was almost zero. That's when she found out her problems had been caused by alcohol and her liver was dying.

"My gastroenterologist said, 'I'm going to tell you straight out, if you take another drink, it could kill you,'" Jenn explains. "I haven't had a drink since."

### **Road to Recovery**

In April of 2021 – almost a year after she'd stopped drinking – Jenn spent a week at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., for testing. She found out her liver would never recover and was slowly poisoning her body.

"It was like a rock in my stomach," Jenn says. "We'd had really good news – doctor thought I might not

even need a transplant. The surgeon said it really depends on how long you want to live. The thought of a liver transplant sounded so daunting, so invasive. It just seemed like so much, and it wasn't what I wanted to hear. Because I had quit drinking, I really thought there was a chance my liver could heal. I was definitely not prepared to hear there was no hope without a transplant."

Two weeks later, Jenn met with an addiction counselor and found out she needed to go through treatment and verified weekly AA meetings.

"I was bitter," Jenn remarks. "I'd quit for a year and thought I was doing just fine. I wasn't even tempted to drink, but I figured I'd check the boxes and do what I needed to do."

**Jenn never expected the counseling and AA meetings to have as big an impact on her life as her eventual transplant.**

"I walked into that first AA meeting, and it was the hardest thing in the world to say I was an alcoholic," Jenn reveals. "Because of the stigma, it was embarrassing to say those words, but I did because I was supposed to. As soon as I said it, I started crying, and I cried through the rest of the meeting."

In that group, Jenn found supportive, understanding people who didn't judge her and would grow to become close friends.

"I was humiliated that I did this to myself," Jenn comments. "I don't know how much more I could damage a person than what I did to myself."

Jenn attended two AA meetings each week and spent three hours a night, three days a week in an in-depth treatment program offered

through The Village Family Service Center in Fargo.

"The assignments were really intense," Jenn notes. "They covered my history of drinking, a plan to make sure I didn't drink, and a plan for relapse prevention. During my second assignment, I realized while I wasn't drinking, I hadn't done anything to help myself. I was completely white-knuckling it, and I was miserable."

Once she had that realization, Jenn had to work on why she did what she did as well as the damage she caused other people.

"I'd been adamant that the person I hurt the most was me," Jenn remarks. "I realized it wasn't. I destroyed relationships; I broke trust. I did things I had to make amends for. **Everyone does a certain amount of damage in the wake of addiction. What matters is where you are and who you are now.**"

Jenn also began to be intentionally grateful every day for her family, friends, and things she used to take for granted. And she regained a relationship with God she thought she'd lost forever.

"By the time I graduated from treatment, I actually liked myself again – I genuinely liked the person I had become," Jenn affirms. "As soon as I became intentional about letting go of worry, everything got so much easier. I absolutely loved my life. I was lighter; I was happier. I didn't feel good, physically, but I enjoyed the time I had."

## One Hit After Another

When Jenn returned to Mayo in August for follow-up appointments, doctors found a tumor in her liver. She went through a procedure a few days later and learned she had two tumors and they were cancerous.



Jenn Hyden stage managed the 2019 production of *Weather the Storm*, which her daughter, Em Mercier, performed in.

"I was very emotional," she remarks. "I couldn't talk about the cancer at all – I could hardly say the words I was so scared. To hear the cancer word when I was already sick and fighting to keep a positive attitude was debilitating. It felt like one hit after another."

If the cancer had spread other organs, Jenn would not be eligible for the transplant list.

"That was the scariest part for me – just the idea of going through all of this only to find I wouldn't be able to get a liver," Jenn says.

But the cancer had not spread, and Jenn went on the list. She expected it would be six to nine months before she received a call that she'd been matched with a donor. Still, after returning home, Andrew St. John, Jenn's fiancé, suggested they pack a go-bag, so they'd be ready whenever the call came.

Three weeks later, on the 6-year anniversary of her dad's death, Jenn received a call from an unknown number. It was Mayo Clinic, and they had a liver for her. Jenn and Andrew were on the road within 45 minutes, driving to Rochester at 9 o'clock at night.

"I'm pretty sure I was in shock," Jenn says. "I don't know that I came out of it until they started prepping me for surgery."

The liver was bruised, and until

doctors harvested it, they wouldn't know how badly it was damaged. But Jenn had to be prepped for surgery, so she'd be ready if it was viable.

Jenn was wheeled into surgery at 11:30 the next morning – the same time that her dad died six years earlier.

“The last thing Andrew said as they wheeled me out was that my dad would be there throughout the surgery, holding my hand and making sure I'm ok, and he'd have an army of angels with every single person in that operating room,” Jenn remarks. “I was still scared, but I knew he was right.”

The surgery was a success – but it wasn't without complications. The next day, Jenn found out a gastric bypass she'd had in 2007 left horrible scar tissue behind, she'd lost so much blood during the transplant that she needed 15 units of blood infusion, and her heart had stopped during the surgery. Her surgeon said in 17 years of doing transplants, hers was one of his most challenging, but once he got through Jenn's complications, the liver fit like it was made for her.

“I believe my dad was with me,” she notes. “And God made sure I was able to make it through.”

After eight days in the hospital, Jenn moved into the Gift of Life Transplant House in Rochester for a month before she was able to return home. Recovery has been slower than Jenn would have liked, but she's getting stronger and feeling better every day.

Going forward, Jenn will be on medication and have follow-up medical visits for the rest of her life. She continues with relapse prevention, AA and grief counselling. And she's looking forward to having more energy, doing the things she loves with a new attitude and outlook on life,

and finding out what her “new normal” is now that she has a healthy liver.

“The second chance at life my donor gave me is really beyond words,” Jenn says. **“Because someone checked a box, I'm able to have a healthy life and a life I will never take for granted again. I can't even express the amount of gratitude and thankfulness I have for that person and their family. It really is the ultimate gift that anyone can give. Every single day I will be grateful for the gift of life I was given.”**

## Help from her Friends

Now, friends and family are rallying around Jenn to offer their support and encouragement by holding a Lend-A-Hand-Up fundraiser.

**The Together Strong Benefit for Jenn Hyden will be held from 1:30 to 4 p.m. on Sunday, Dec. 12, at NDSU McGovern Alumni Center, 1241 N. University Dr. in Fargo.**

The benefit includes:

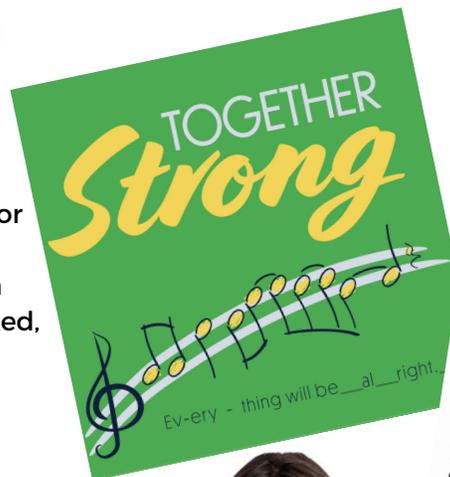
- Performances of Christmas and musical theater songs
- An online and silent auction
- Christmas treats available for purchase

Performances start at 2 p.m., and seating is general admission with a free-will offering.

## How to Help

**Visit Jenn's LendaAHandUp.org donation page to give, bid on the auction, sign up to volunteer, or buy your Together Strong t-shirt!**

You can also direct cash/checks payable to the Jennifer Mercier Hyden Benefit Fund to: Bell Bank, 3100 13th Ave. S., Fargo, ND 58103.



**TOGETHER Strong**

Benefit for **JENN HYDEN**

1:30 to 4 p.m.  
Sunday, Dec. 12  
NDSU McGovern Alumni Center  
1241 N. University Dr, Fargo

Help support Jenn Hyden – an active member of the local theater community and longtime NDSU Foundation staff member – who is recovering from a liver transplant.

Scan the barcode to go to Jenn's LendaAHandUp.org donation page to give, bid on the auction, sign up to volunteer, or buy your Together Strong t-shirt!

You can also direct cash/checks payable to the Jennifer Mercier Hyden Benefit Fund to: Bell Bank, 3100 13th Ave. S., Fargo, ND 58103

- Performances of Christmas and musical theater songs
- Online and silent auction
- Christmas treats, cider and hot chocolate available for purchase

Performances start at 2 p.m.  
General admission seating  
Free-will offering

**LEND A HAND UP**  
Dakota Medical Foundation  
Learn more and give, LendaHandUp.org

Gifts boosted 20%!