

120 hours

What
happened
to *Saturday?*

Saturday, Jan 18, 2014, 10:23 PM

Dear Friends of Donna,

Donna is in critical condition at Sibley Hospital. Some of you don't know that so this will come as a bit of a shock. I'm sorry for that. But here's an update on how she is doing.

She was admitted on Friday in an effort to begin diuresis to remove the water retained as a result of her newly diagnosed kidney condition. It turns out she has double pneumonia as a result of the breakdown in the body's immune system caused by the prednisone therapy. Her pneumonia caused serious difficulty breathing, a situation that worsened dramatically as the day went on. This ultimately led her to be admitted to the ICU and finally, a breathing tube was inserted because her own struggle to breathe was exhausting her. She is sedated, stable and sleeping now. Broad spectrum antibiotics are being used to try to bring the infection under control. A culture will be taken to see if targeted antibiotics can be prescribed. We'll see how she does day by day but we can expect this to go on for three to five days as the treatment continues. I'll keep you all posted daily on her improving condition.

Thank you so much for your concern and expressions of sympathy. Mikell, James and I will be there to support Donna. As soon as she is out of the ICU and ready to have visitors, I will let you know. I appreciate the many offers of help and loving expressions of sympathy but, honestly, until we can turn this around and get Donna on her feet again, there is simply nothing to do except keep a vigil with me as she gets better. This is a gal who's never been sick a day in her life and suddenly finds herself in a big struggle.

Love you all,

Burkey

Saturday, Jan 18, 2014, 7:12 PM

We are in New York. Will leave around 9 am to return. In shock. Tell her I order her to get better. I will not lose her

Geralyn

Saturday, Jan 18, 2014, 10:57 PM

Cathie called me two hours ago with this terrible news. I am in Miami with Lindsay. Words cannot express what I feel. I find it incompressible that our dear wonderful loving selfless Donna is fighting for her life. Please know how much I love her and you. Praying like mad for you all. My love to you and the kids. We will get through this together. Big hugs.

Love Carole

Saturday, Jan 18, 2014, 10:58 PM

I'm not a big prayer but I will pray like Hell for Donna and you and Mikell and James—— you are in our thoughts and hearts and beings....we love you.

peter & alison

Saturday, Jan 18, 2014, 11:06PM

Thanks so much for letting us know. We are devastated to hear this about our precious Donna; you are all in our constant and loving thoughts and we'll be most grateful for any updates you are able to send.

We are ready to do anything that might be helpful to any of you, any time. With our love,
Alison

Saturday, Jan 18, 2014, 11:24 PM

I am praying and sending you warm thoughts. Hang in there

Joe

Saturday, Jan 18, 2014, 11:24 PM

I know you and the girls are enormously concerned and keeping vigil with Donna. Please let her know that we are sending healing energy and lots of love to her and you.

We are just a train ride away and will help in any way that you need. I am a great re-

searcher of all topics so give me a task and I will find answers should you need medical information on doctors or best places to be treated for any diagnosis.

She could not ask for a better advocate than you and I know her spirit and determination are going to help her turn the corner on this illness quickly.

Love, Jacque

Saturday, Jan 18, 2014, 11:31 PM

Alison Fenn just forwarded me your email about Donna. John and I are in shock frankly so I can only imagine how all of you feel. I just want to ask you to add John and I to your email list of friends to let us know how she is doing. We love you both and can't imagine how this all happened. Life is just so freaking random. I wish I could say something that would be of comfort to you and Mikel and James but I know all you want is for her to get better. I'm counting on this to be the case. I'm so very sorry.

XO Jenni Blackburn

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XO Jenni Blackburn

Saturday, Jan 18, 2014, 11:42 PM

I am so sorry to hear this. I have been thinking of you guys all day and now I know why. Having just gone through this with my brother I know how scary this is and how much everyone's thoughts and prayers made a difference to me. Our love to you all. Sherry

96 hours

What
happened
to Sunday?

Sunday, Jan 19, 2014, 11:51 AM

Hi Team,

I'm going to ask that no one come by today. You probably won't get to see her anyway and I am a very uninteresting second.

By way of explanation, the steroid treatment was supplemented by Coumadin, a blood thinner. Now with slight blood in the lungs, this thinning needs to be reversed with... well, think a very, very large bowl of Special K. They're going to dialyze her to take off fluids (she'll be sedatively thrilled but this does not mean she'll be a long-term prisoner of dialysis). Basically, this is a moving circus of heart, kidneys and lungs almost too complex to follow; in other words, it's a very active therapeutic process.

Good news is by the time she comes off the sedation, she won't remember anything. Neither will I.

xo

Burkey

Sunday, Jan 19, 2014, 10:42 PM

First of all, thanks everyone for your support. If Donna ever chose to measure her life on a scale (and she seems uninterested), your love would set a new standard for value. I'm reading her your notes as long as I can hold it together.

Today, I think, was a good day. Triage in this case is basically (1) stabilize the breathing and prevent neurological damage (check!), (2) start work on the pneumonia and get rid of the fluid in the lungs and (3) worry about the kidneys when we get a moment.

(1) She's got a breathing tube and doesn't complain about it one bit. I, and perhaps you, would be ripping it out in a frenzy. Her twilight drugs and New Jersey State Trooper attitude are keeping her calm. Great, because blood pressure is chill which allows us to go to (2).

(2) This morning her pneumonia was worse not better, but the antibiotics have yet to kick in. In fact, we've probably got two days before we see measurable improvement. That's just the way a course of intense antibiotics works. However, in order to dry out the lungs, we began dialysis of her kidneys (which have shut down). That went really well. Today was a test run to determine her tolerance. Flying colors. Tomorrow, they'll get to work sucking all the fluid out and she will battle Cher for a spot at the Academy Awards.

(3) Kidneys will probably be dialyzed for a couple of weeks until the fluid is manageable and we can get to work on the problem that started all of this. According to the doc, 95% of the time, kidneys return to full function once the trauma has passed.

You will be glad to know that dialysis required lighter sedation and she was groggily alert. She wrote out questions in an archaic script which we began to decipher more precisely as the exercise continued. We will have pen and paper ready for visitors which leads me to...

Let's get some visits going. She was really thrilled with seeing Geralyn who ignored all the rules and showed up anyway this evening as unreasonable friends like Cathie and her are wont to do. Both have been flogged but it turns out, the best medicine is in fact love from all of you, given intravenously. Text me. I apologize for being the gatekeeper. Another dialysis is scheduled for 9:00 A.M. tomorrow. I am told to keep her calm but would much rather see her light up under your care.

Burkey

Sunday, Jan 19, 2014, 7:12 AM

Dearest Burkey (the ultimate friend of Donna!). Boyd and I are indeed in shock, but comforted to know she is in good hands. I can only imagine how stressful and difficult this is for you and yours. We know that the, last thing you need while you are focused on supporting her is for all of us well intentioned types to be pestering you with our questions or (god forbid) offers to bring a casserole, so we will await your update as we keep that vigil. Please know the moral support squad is suited up and on the field. We love you both very much....

Betty

Sunday, Jan 19, 2014, 9:20 AM

Thanks for the update Burkey. It may seem otherwise now, but serious as her condition is, Donna's a strong girl and I know she'll weather this. Let us know if you need anything, ANYTHING.

Grady

Sunday, Jan 19, 2014, 9:45 AM

I just saw your emails and I am in shock. I have had her on my mind since she went to the hospital and we were texting on Friday - I never expected this. Please - tell me what you want me to do. I have been where you are more than once and I know that having too many people come to the hospital can be overwhelming. Where do you need me most?

Love you guys, Char

Sunday, Jan 19, 2014, 11:10 AM

Burkey - whatever I can possibly do to help Donna just ask and it will happen. If she is up for you reading messages to her here is mine.

Donna - I'm sorry that this is happening to you and I love and miss you very much. Unfortunately you are visiting a place that I have been far too often during the past two years. You have probably already figured this out for yourself but I thought I would pass along what made it all tolerable for me. You have far more strength than you ever could have possibly realized. It is there within you just recognize and accept it. When you see it reach out for it, embrace it and accept that you are stronger than all that is being thrown at you. This can't and won't get the best of you. The indignities forced on you from breathing tubes to dialysis

are all things that you have the strength to overcome. You are one of the strongest persons that I know and now is the time to quietly call on and be comfortable with that strength. This to will pass.

Sunday, Jan 19, 2014, 11:12 PM

Thank you for the update. We have been thinking of Donna and your family and hoping that Donna is healing. Donna sounds like she has been so strong and meeting all the challenges the doctors are giving. She and your family are loved by so many, that I hope the love will continue to heal her. There is no one who could be more loved!

Between Donna's incredible strength and the love she is surrounded by, we know she will continue to regain her strength and before we know it she will be redecorating the ICU having taught the doctors, the nurses and all of us what strength, love and the amazing Donna spirit can do.

We would of course want to see Donna at anytime, but also know the list is very long of people who want to hug her. Please know we are available 24/7 to help in anyway. We send all our love and healing thoughts for Donna's speedy recovery.

Sending all our love, Judy and Peter

Sunday, Jan 19, 2014, 11:27 PM

Carole just forwarded me the news about Donna - and email chain that explained what happened -- and am so, so very glad that things are turning for the better. Donna is one of the most extraordinarily lovely people in the world, so compassionate and considerable of everyone-- and while all those who love her can never repay all of her kindnesses, we will do our best to rally to her - and your - sides in the coming days. Both of you have been to hell and back. And then some. How harrowing, and heartbreaking, and ultimately, heroic. My heart goes out to you both. Virtual hugs...

Mary Jane

72 hours

What
happened
to *Monday?*

Monday, Jan 20, 2014, 11:51 AM

Great news. It appears Donna has turned the corner during the night. The dialysis not only removed fluid from her body but also from her lungs. Dialysis will begin again soon to remove even more now that she's proven she can tolerate this procedure. Much better airflow and blood pressure, although she's still on a respirator. The antibiotics have started to kick in.

Monday, Jan 20, 2014, 9:00 PM

Well, I think I need bother you no more than once a day (and maybe not even) barring some reversal. Today was more progress and I suspect now we're just in for the long slog. Twice as much water was removed with today's dialysis and we expect the same tomorrow. Vitals are steady and strong. Antibiotics will kick in soon enough if they haven't already.

Donna has become quite the Chatty Cathy since dialysis has reduced sedation leaving her a bit more alert. When I say "chatty," I mean with a pen and paper and hands that wave and gesture. (Still a large tube down her throat and will be for at least two more days.) Her most charming missive was, "I'm so drugged." And it's true. She retains more or less nothing of the day in her Twilight Zone even as she is conversant, seemingly alert and engaged. I think it's like Hansel & Gretel leaving crumbs along the path to remind them of the way back. The birds snatch them up and she turns to wonder where she is. "What happened to Sunday?" is my second favorite. This means I believe the experiment in visitors was mistaken. Let's wait until she's unhooked, unplugged and undrugged.

If Donna is Dopey, then I'm Weepy. I leaked tears all day just on the growing certainty that she would not be taken away from me. And you, too, of course.

Monday, Jan 19, 2014, 9:13 AM

Erika just wrote the email to the studio. I'm sure she will send it to you for your approval but it looked perfect to me. I was so glad to get the update last night that Donna is awake and back giving orders. :) I am still at the lake waiting for one of Doug's ups deliveries. He was going to drive down here after work to bring it in the house and then get up and drive back to DC at an ungodly hour so I told him that I would stay. Really messed up my plan for today but I'm not complaining. Nice to sit here drinking coffee and looking at the river.

Tell Donna not to worry about any decisions that we make without her. She is the voice in my head and I always listen to it.

Sending love and hugs. Char

Monday, Jan 19, 2014, 9:51 AM

So very, very glad to get the good news that Donna is now on the road to recovery, even if it's a slow process.

Please let Margo know if she could visit Donna tomorrow or Wednesday. I would very much like to go by for a visit on Thursday, which is the first full day that I'll be back in Bethesda.

My thoughts have been with both of you quite frequently throughout this extremely difficult ordeal. In getting to know the two of you better as a welcomed guest in your home, I have also come to realize that I love you both immeasurably.

Love, Townsend

Monday, Jan 19, 2014, 10:02 AM

I've always respected you greatly. On the emotional level I sometimes (many times?) have felt like we were Venus and Mars. BUT -- when I got to your description of Dopey and Weepy -- I cried right along with you. Maybe we're not as different as I thought -- or maybe Donna is an amazing life force that brings out the best -- and the commonality -- in the people she loves. I'm SO HAPPY for you man -- I can't even describe it. You're an amazing couple -- very few people are lucky enough to get to where you two are ---

Fondly -- Joe

Monday, Jan 19, 2014,10:18 AM

Sending big hugs to you, Donna, and all of the Belsers. Hoping for a quick recovery for one of my favorite ladies! Please let me know if there's anything at all I can do to help.

XOXO Liz

Monday, Jan 19, 2014,10:20 AM

I've just learned from Annie on the other side of the globe about Donna's illness. I've seen the updates, and am much reassured. Right now I'll just send to both Donna and you my love and loyalty, along with thankful prayers for a continuation of the trend. If you have a task you can usefully assign me, I would value the opportunity.

Love, Teddy

24 hours

What
happened
to Tuesday?


Tuesday, Jan 21, 2014, 6:50 M

I'm getting calls so I know we still are looking for an update. Bottom line: steady improvement on multiple fronts. The docs reduced her dependence on the ventilator so she has taken on more of the breathing assignment herself. That's a big deal in this ballgame. Another day's dialysis removed two more liters of fluid from her body and her lungs have been helped by this. Still some edema (that's swelling, Joe) in the lungs but on its way to clearing. Clear lungs are the key to removing the tube. We hope to be able to remove the tube tomorrow then watch out! You'll be hearing from her.

Propofol was replaced with Atavan, allowing the brain to cooperate—and not suppress—the breathing process. (Drug aficionados like Tom know this but Propofol is called Milk of Amnesia, pretty much erasing your memory of the whole sad affair as a bonus. It's given with Fentanyl to relieve the pain.) Much less strong, Atavan has the side benefit of bringing Donna back to Planet Earth. Now that Donna is more or less with it, she has begun to realize what she's been through. That was a bit of a freakout today. Planet Earth is not all it's cracked up to be.

Other medical stuff: sodium is almost back in the normal range. (Sodium was a problem because it was so low that it complicated the dialysis which sucked salt as well as fluid out of the body.) White blood cell count is better. A two-pronged picc line was inserted in her arm that allows the team to remove other lines in her arms as they "age out." I've never had anything stuck in me long enough to even know that a line could age out. A couple of lines were removed as a result. Some other tubes got yanked today, too.

That's it, really. A gratefully slow day in la la land.

A bright blue sky with scattered white, fluffy clouds. The text is overlaid on the sky.

What
happened
to
Wednesday?


Wednesday, Jan 22, 2014, 7:00 PM

Hello Village,

I'm going to email an update every day about this time. I appreciate all your emails during the day but I can probably manage them best in this summary. If going forward, I fail to answer you, please don't take it amiss. I completely understand your need to know. Most of the time without the docs filling me in, I don't really have anything to report except Donna is sleeping peacefully in front of me.

Today, we had a bit of a setback. The doc has always reiterated this would require patience; we might take one step back for every ten going forward. We tried to take out the tube in her throat today but there was blood in the tube and the lungs began to fill with a bit of fluid. She did become anxious as the sedative was reduced and she realized she had a giant PVC down her throat. Like I said earlier, she's tolerated this extraordinarily well but, good heavens, when I start to think about it myself, I gag. So, they sedated her again with Propofol to return to a quiet state, began dialysis again as extra insurance against fluid, did another echocardiogram, ran blood enzymes and turned up the respirator.

We're going to try again tomorrow morning. Dialysis early, followed by an attempt to pull the tube. I will let everyone know tomorrow at the moment the tube is removed.



What
happened
to **Thursday**?

Thursday, Jan 23, 2014, 6:23PM

I was unaware of this skill set but my daughter is an editorial consultant. Therefore, today's update is going to take a new form.

Executive Summary

Tube out. Lips dry but all good.

The Back Story

It was a dark and stormy night, the wind playing like a pan flute through the thin bare branches of ancient trees. The snow whipped around my face as I trudged across the lot to the hospital entrance... Not that story? Too much information? Try this:

We're in the clear. Well, we're in a big, big clearing. Today was a huge success. Yesterday, attempting to remove the tube from her throat, she had an episode of flash pulmonary edema which is a flash flood in the lungs. The doc immediately put her back to Euphoria to chill. Then they sucked out another four liters of fluid through dialysis. After another round today, she was lighter by a total of 15 water pounds in three days, basically what she'd accumulated since the beginning of the kidney episode. (Insert diet joke here)

Her lips are mountain-climber chapped, but she cleaned up pretty good. She's not to eat or drink anything tonight. Tomorrow they will bring in a Swallowing Specialist. (It's so tempting to pick that one up and run with it) who apparently... hell, I have no idea what in the world they could possibly do but I'm sure it's an honorable profession.

She'll be in ICU a couple of days getting her voice back and if nothing else goes south, make her way out of this place. I think I'll just unclog your email boxes from here on. Maybe back online in a week just to comfort all of you starved for email. As soon as she starts shopping online, we'll know she's completely cured. Meanwhile, if you want in-depth information, email mikellbelsler@gmail.com with all your questions. Really. Even the smallest ones. She's a professional! :)

xo Burkey