Flights that save lives

February 22, 2012

We all have our reasons for flying every time we step on our aircraft – for work, vacation, moving, family visits and more. On Feb. 14, customer Tom O’Driscoll stepped on board to head to Los Angeles to save someone’s life through organ donation.

The two-time donor (which is rare, but not unique), first donated his left kidney 11 years ago. This time around, Mr. O’Driscoll donated part of his liver.

In preparation for his trip, Mr. O’Driscoll contacted us to inquire about travel assistance to and from Los Angeles. For his first donation, he received travel assistance through the National Living Donor Assistance Center. This time that wasn’t available due to the organization’s policy on providing a fixed amount of funding per donor.

“I decided that I would reach out to individual providers for flights [United], a hotel [Hyatt has a property next to the hospital] and a rental car company [Hertz],” said Mr. O’Driscoll. “I wrote letters and was delighted that all three offered to help. Since I need to be in LA for about three weeks for the surgery and recovery – it would have been a big expense to cover all by myself.”

Mr. O’Driscoll wrote Scott a letter, which then landed in the hands of our Global Community Engagement team. They reached out to our charity partner Transplant Recipients International Organization (TRIO) – a nonprofit organization we have been partners with since 1998 that is committed to improving the quality of lives touched by the miracle of transplantation through support, advocacy, education and awareness.

"With the continued expansion of organ sharing and donation, it becomes more and more important to facilitate travel for donors and recipients in order to achieve the most positive outcomes," shared TRIO President Jim Gleeson, who received a heart transplant 28 years ago. “Travel distances can be a real challenge, as not everyone has the resources and expenses to do so. When a social worker sees that challenge, they get in touch with us, and then we get in touch with United and act as the go between. We are so thankful and appreciative of our partnership with United – it has saved lives.”

In the last two years, TRIO provided 37 flights for its recipients and living donors, like Mr. O’Driscoll, through our partnership. As Jim notes, with over 100,000 people in the U.S. waiting for an organ transplant, each flight has meant that an individual is fully restored to health.

“United is a hidden gem in our resources,” said Jim. “Everyone at United is so cooperative and helpful. It’s such a unique blessing, what this partnership provides. For donors and recipients, travel can be a huge and overwhelming challenge. United takes away the travel challenge for them. It’s a blessing to people desperate for life.”

It’s a sentiment Mr. O’Driscoll echoes. Post-donation, he will be in Los Angeles for a few weeks recovering.

“The biggest thing I want to convey is that more people should consider living organ donations,” said Mr. O’Driscoll. “I recovered great from the kidney donation and have since done nine full Ironman triathlons and numerous marathons. With liver donation, your liver slowly regrows to nearly its full original volume in about two months – how amazing the human body is. I plan on returning to my active lifestyle and hope that I’ll be doing more Ironman races in the future.”

“To Tom and United on behalf of TRIO, we say thank you,” said Jim. “What you are doing is inspiring and life-changing. It takes a community to provide these critical resources, and this partnership does that. I encourage everyone to stay involved with and to sign up to be an organ or living organ donor.”

To learn more about getting involved with organ donation, types of organ donation and more, visit TRIO’s collection of over 700 transplant related web site links here. Interested in contributing miles to TRIO through our Miles on a Mission program? Donate here.
By Rachel Landgraf

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