

# Kidney recipients, now friends, train for transplant games

Mike Gahagan jokes that one of his kidneys is Irish and the other Polish. Actually, the kidneys aren't his. The Irish organ belongs to his brother and the Polish one came from his wife. In two separate transplant operations seven years apart, Sean Gahagan and Christa Gahagan each volunteered a kidney to Mr. Gahagan when his two organs failed initially in 1995 after a lifelong struggle with hypertension.

The Immaculate Heart of Mary, Baynesville, parishioner – and his kidneys – will participate in the 2008 U.S. Transplant Games sponsored by the National Kidney Foundation. He's training now for racquetball and golf as part of Team Maryland. "I've played golf all my life," his favorite sport, said Mr. Gahagan, 59. "I'm not very good but just the fact I can participate is a great thing."

The Gahagans joined a health club several years ago, and Mr. Gahagan has reacquainted himself with racquetball which he played in school.

"I'm not very good at that either," he joked. "No, I'm alright. I can hold my own." To prepare better for the games, he joined a racquetball league and plays weekly.

Any recipient of an organ (such as a heart, lung, pancreas, or kidney) is able to play in the four-day event, slated for July in Pittsburg, Pa. The games are held every two years to give athletes a chance to meet other transplant recipients from around the country, share stories, honor donors, and support the thousands of other patients still waiting for organs.

"It's great I can do this," he said, "I don't care if I win anything."

The competition also will include badminton, basketball, bowling, cycling, swimming, volleyball, track, ping-pong, running and tennis.

Phil Cioffioni thinks those who donate organs should be allowed to play in the U.S. Transplant Games.

"They're the ones who are the unsung heroes," he said, referring to his personal

hero, brother Ed Cioffioni Jr., 52, who donated a kidney when Phil Cioffioni needed one.

The 47-year-old computer specialist at Woodlawn's Social Security Administration is doing well and feeling great a year later.

Team Maryland asked him to form a basketball team for the games. He plays Thursday nights with a group of friends who have played together for more than 15 years.

"This is right up my alley," he said. "I look forward to just going out there and having fun, to promote organ and tissue donation, and be with people who have gone through the same situation."

The Cioffioni brothers also grew up in the Immaculate Heart of Mary parish and are graduates of Calvert Hall College High School, Towson, as is Sean Gahagan.

Although the two kidney recipients still attend the parish, Phil Cioffioni and Mike Gahagan hadn't met until mutual friends suggested Mr. Gahagan call Mr. Cioffioni to talk him through his nervousness before undergoing the kidney transplant. They met for the first time at a Living Legacy Foundation event, for which they both volunteer.

"Now we're friends," said Mr. Gahagan, the director of development for Emerge, a nonprofit organization. "It worked out nice."