

## Picarillo making the most of her second chance

Troy woman running at Freihofer's after transplant

By Mark Singelais

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Gina Picarillo of Troy plans to wear a T-shirt that reads, "Running on a donated organ" when the 52-year-old tries the first race of her life.

Ten months after receiving a kidney transplant, Picarillo will participate in the five-kilometer Freihofer's Run For Women on Saturday with her 13-year-old twin daughters and three of her sisters.

"My whole thought is to enhance my quality of life," she said. "I want to take care of this kidney."

Picarillo attended the Freihofer's last year, but only to watch her daughters run. She was in no shape to try it herself because she'd been on a transplant waiting list for three years.

"I couldn't see myself doing it last summer," she said.

Then her health took a turn for worse in late August, when she went into renal failure and had to go on dialysis for six weeks.

Picarillo said she neglected her health for years, ironic since she's a nurse at Albany Medical Center. She developed high blood pressure that contributed to her kidney failure.

"A lot of it was hereditary," she said. "I was brought up eating badly and not exercising. It was in our family. My sisters, who are doing the race with me, they all want to get into better health. They see what happened to me and they're trying to get much healthier."

Picarillo finally located a new kidney through the Center for Donation and Transplant in Albany, which serves 30 counties in New York and Vermont. She underwent the transplant, performed by Dr. David Conti, last Oct. 14 at Albany Medical Center.

She was well enough to leave the hospital after seven days and spent three months recuperating. Picarillo will be on medicine the rest of her life to prevent her body from rejecting the new kidney.

Adopting a healthy lifestyle is another key factor to prevent transplant rejection. With that in mind, Picarillo became interested in running through the Freihofer's Training Challenge, which gets together 413 participants to run on Mondays and Saturdays at Colonie Town Park and the

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Picarillo is training with her sisters, who also never have run a race. Together they went three miles for the first time last week. Gina Picarillo said she expects to run and walk the Freihofer's course because she's still getting back her endurance.

Though she's never been an athlete, Picarillo has shown the toughness and stubbornness of one. As a single mother providing for three children, including a 14-year-old son, she worked as long as she could before needing the transplant.

"My doctor told me I fought it until the bitter end," she said.

She hid her condition from her family, according to her sister Kerri Yarter.

Yarter said she was "shocked" when her sister first went on dialysis.

"She's doing pretty good, better than I thought she was going to be doing," Yarter said. "It's a long road for her, but she's actually doing very well and I think she's motivated me to do this training too."

Besides her own well-being, Picarillo is taking part in the Freihofer's to promote awareness for organ donation.

There are more than 100,000 patients waiting for a life-saving transplant in the United States, according to the Center for Donation and Transplant.

"I think there's so many people out there who are on the waiting list and they're dying from waiting," Picarillo said. "We really don't need (organs) after we've died. It costs the health-care system a lot more for people to be on dialysis than it does to give a transplant."

She said she owes her life to the person who donated the kidney. While the program provides anonymity, it's Picarillo's understanding the organ came from a teenager who died. She plans to write a letter to the victim's family, which will be delivered through the Center for Donation and Transplant.

"I think definitely I'll say first, 'Thank you so much for (donating).'" Picarillo said. "I'm a single parent, the only one my children have. I can't thank them enough for that hope of having my life. It truly is a gift of life, having a second chance at life."

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## At a glance

### Freihofer's Run For Women

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Where: Albany

More information, registration: <http://freihofersrun.com/>

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