

STORIES of HOPE

Transplant Offers Workout Warrior New Lease on Life

When gyms across the nation shut down during the COVID-19 pandemic, Sergio Arriaga was eager to find a way to continue his cardio regimen.

“I would go hiking on the weekends,” said Sergio, a California native and father of two daughters. “But I was looking for something a little more intense and got a mountain bike. Between the trails and street, I was doing 20 to 25 miles a day.”

Sergio did not expect to end up with a serious injury, but that’s exactly what happened. “I was biking on the street and was moving on and off the curbs to avoid people,” he explained. “I fell and popped my shoulder. I tried to put it back into place. I didn’t realize I tore the ligaments off my clavicle.”



Sergio tried to keep going, but he was in too much pain. His wife, a nurse, encouraged him to seek treatment. X-rays did not reveal any broken bones, and Sergio ended up going back and forth between doctors before eventually discovering that he would need surgery.

He was reluctant at first, but when he couldn’t use his dominant hand to lift a glass of water, he started to realize how serious this injury was. In fact, Sergio couldn’t lift his elbow past his shoulder.

The doctor explained that Sergio needed shoulder reconstruction to reattach the torn ligaments. “He told me I had two options,” Sergio said. “They could use my own tissue by cutting open my knee – or they would only have to cut open my shoulder if they used donor tissue. ... They would put two holes in my clavicle and use the donor tissue to tie it back down to the appropriate bone.”

Sergio knew it would take some time to recover following the surgery. After a few weeks, he could drink a cup of water, put his hand above his head, pick up a pen to write, and take groceries off the shelf.

Soon he was given the go-ahead for light weightlifting to help strengthen his shoulder. He is also back to biking.

Before his injury, Sergio knew nothing about tissue donation. “I knew about the organs,” he said. “The lungs, heart, kidneys. I found out about eyes and bone marrow from the Will Smith movie ‘Seven Pounds.’ I didn’t know about tissue until after my surgery.”

His understanding of transplant wasn’t the only thing that changed. “Prior to my surgery, I was not big on donation,” he said. “I believed you should go in one piece. Now, as a recipient, it has changed my entire perspective.”

Words cannot describe Sergio’s gratitude – and he knows he has his donor to thank. If he had the chance to speak to his donor, he would say, “I really appreciate your sacrifice. It changed my lifestyle drastically, and now I’m back to a normal life, one I took for granted. I want you to know how grateful I am.”