

# Moraga Mom Gives Thanks for Every Breath She Takes

By Cathy Dausman



Laura Zellmer Photo Cathy Dausman

Some moments in life steal your breath away.

Laura Zellmer has had more than her share, and they weren't always good. The Moraga mom has cystic fibrosis, an inherited progressive disease that causes persistent lung infections and limits her ability to breathe. At its worst, CF made Zellmer old before her time. She had a feeding tube for 10 years, was hooked to an oxygen tank and required a wheelchair for mobility. She developed bursitis and a hunched posture. She couldn't even complete a full sentence without endless "scary and tiring" coughing fits.

An inhaler and specialized vest helped clear her lungs but Zellmer still suffered three lung collapses as a result of excessive coughing. By necessity she led a rather sedentary life. Diagnosed with CF as a toddler, she became self-conscious of her condition as a teen. Still, she attended college and began living and working in San Francisco after graduation. It was there she met her future husband. They married 12 years ago. When the couple learned they were expecting, Zellmer decided to finish a series of self-interviews she began in the mid-1990s and formed them "as a letter to my son."

"Breathe in Life" chronicled her struggles and premiered in Moraga in 2014 (<https://vimeo.com/128647213>). By January

2015, Zellmer's lungs were functioning at less than 30 per cent of normal. If there was one bit of good news tucked into that diagnosis it was that Zellmer had become eligible for a double lung transplant.

Preparation for the surgery required extensive testing, registering on the United Network for Organ Sharing list, learning lung transplant protocol and three "emotionally draining" dry runs. During each dry run Zellmer was called into the hospital to prepare for surgery only to learn it wouldn't happen. Each time "I had to say my goodbyes (to family)," she said. Ideally Zellmer's transplant team sought a young, healthy pair of lungs of identical blood type with a proper tissue match and size. Realistically, Zellmer had to decide if she would risk accepting a set of compromised lungs from a donor who had spent time in jail or contracted hepatitis or AIDS.

In March, while Zellmer was again hospitalized for a serious lung infection, she was told of a possible match. Her transplant took place on Easter Sunday, performed by Dr. Jasleen Kukreja, a cardiothoracic surgeon at UCSF.

The life of a new transplant patient is precarious, and, Zellmer says, "regimented." The surgery requires sawing the sternum in half and placing the patient on a ventilator. Although prepared, Zellmer still felt claustrophobic during the six hours post-surgery when she

remained intubated with her arms restrained to prevent pulling out the breathing tube.

She couldn't drive for three months until her sternum healed to avoid the risk of airbag injury. Zellmer still takes anti-rejection drugs (she always will) but no longer struggles to maintain a healthy weight. Her feeding tube is gone. She's off supplemental oxygen and doesn't need her wheelchair.

Zellmer never once coughed during her interview; something her son Everett appreciates. "I like it (life after transplant) a lot more," Everett said, although he admits one thing hasn't changed — his mom is still "super neat."

"My life was on hold for the past two years," Zellmer says. Her transplant "completely changed the life of my entire family."

In spite of some setbacks, Zellmer is excited to move about. She has taken beach walks and hiked a mountain, enjoying the pine-scented air. When her travel curfew is lifted, Zellmer hopes to visit Yellowstone and New York, where she can introduce Everett to fireflies. She wants to revisit Europe and see New Zealand and Australia or take a safari.

Most importantly, she wants to find a purpose for her newfound energy, either with part-time work or a volunteer job. "Breathe in Life" means "don't take life for granted," Zellmer says. "I was truly dying; now I'm completely living."

## Cystic Fibrosis Statistics

According to the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation ([www.cff.org](http://www.cff.org)):

- More than 30,000 people in the U.S. (70,000 worldwide) live with CF
- Approximately 1,000 new cases per year are diagnosed
- Half the CF population is age 18 or older.
- 202 CF patients received double lung transplants in 2014.
- A CF transplant patient's new lungs are unaffected by CF, but the disease remains in other parts of the body.

For more information, visit:

- [www.vimeo.com/128647213](http://www.vimeo.com/128647213)
- [www.cff.org/Living-with-CF/Lung-Transplantation](http://www.cff.org/Living-with-CF/Lung-Transplantation)
- [www.unos.org](http://www.unos.org)

## Lew's Abstract Work Shines at LLLC

Local artist David Lew's work is now on display at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center until Dec. 8. The American painter of Asian origin's work can be described as abstractions with bright colors that tend to bring visual excitement to observers.

Lew sometimes combines the abstraction with realistic themes, such as "Fish." "I painted this painting from the koi fish from the pond of my backyard," says the artist. Lew adds that the abstract nature of this painting is obvious, however, the details of the koi fishes are not ignored, they are depicted in a very realistic way, that conveys to the viewer this very moment that all fish (except one) were swimming toward a single source — probably food — or toward a light at the bottom of the painting. "One fish was going the wrong direction as if it was curious and wanting to find out why everyone was dashing the other way, causing traffic congestion as two of them in the middle collided with each other," he explains.

Lew's work exemplifies the artist's training in his early years in Asian Contemporary Art, with strong stokes or variable shapes of lines in a calligraphic style. The painter was born in Shanghai and studied contemporary Chinese painting under Master Cheng Shifa. He was a staff painter at the International Gallery in Hong Kong while attending Hong Kong's University's Art School. He worked and studied in Germany for seven years before moving to California.

Lew's paintings are also coming to the canvas from his rich imagination and inner visions. He describes the painting called "Sun Power Abstraction" as something of a photo shot from outer space, maybe a satellite, capturing the passing movement of a tremendous energy source, probably the sun. "It gave me the inspiration to paint multiple layers of transparent colors which do not create a confusion but a harmonious environment — like our universe," he says.

Lew's work is on exhibit in the Homework Center of the Lafayette Library, 3491 Mt Diablo Blvd. — S. Braccini



Sun Power Abstraction

Photo provided



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