

EDITOR'S PICK ALERT

## After two false starts, Ringgold woman needing a double-lung transplant remains in a waiting pattern

Tonya Barker, 55, was diagnosed with respiratory condition last year. She's spent months preparing for a rare double-lung transplant. Two times, four-hour-long preparations turned out to be false starts.

John Crane  
Apr 11, 2021

**T**onya Barker is overwhelmed with mixed emotions Friday afternoon while she waits at her apartment in Durham, N.C., until it's time to head to Duke University Medical Center.

It's just more than an hour before she must go through another four-hour preparation for what could be a rare double-lung transplant.

It will be her second session following a previous four-hour-long prep that turned out to be a false start. The lungs Barker was set to receive were not viable for the procedure.

"I'm excited, overwhelmed, but sad for the donor's family," Barker, 55, said during a telephone interview Friday. "Lots of thoughts go through your mind."

Barker has a rare chronic lung disease that puts her in need of a double-lung transplant. The procedure is expected to take about eight hours.

At about 9:30 p.m. Friday she learns it was another false start. She has to keep waiting.

She was diagnosed with bronchiolitis obliterans in July and hasn't been able to work at her job at Edward Jones in Danville, where she has been a business office administrator for 18 years.

---

### People are also reading...

- 1 **Get ready to scoot around Danville; company set to bring electric stand-up devices**
- 2 **Danville police arrest suspect in pawn shop burglary**
- 3 **Work begins to remove finishing building at Schoolfield, making way for Danville's new casino**
- 4 **Suspect, previously facing weapon charge, indicted on first-degree murder count in Danville shooting**

---

During her first four-hour prep April 5 she was hooked up to different types of equipment while undergoing EKGs, chest X-rays and blood draws. She went through the whole process again Friday night.

"They are working on you constantly," Barker said.

With tubes going into her body, she struggles with the guilt of receiving organs from someone who has recently died.

“Because I’m a Christian, I wrestle with the fact that somebody has passed away for me to live,” Barker said.

Even after the emotional roller coaster during hours of preparation, the operation can be called off until another day.

“When you get that call [to head to the hospital for prep] and it’s not viable, you have to get unplugged and unhooked and you know you’re going to have to go through this again,” Barker said.

## **The condition**

Bronchiolitis obliterans is an inflammatory condition that affects the lung’s tiniest airways, the bronchioles, according to the National Institutes of Health. The bronchioles become damaged and inflamed, leading to scarring that blocks the airways.

Symptoms include a dry cough, shortness of breath, fatigue and wheezing, according to the NIH.

Barker’s ordeal began when she could not stop coughing beginning in late 2019.

“I got sick in December,” Barker said during an interview in October 2020. “I just couldn’t get rid of that cough.”

So in January 2020, Barker went to Sovah Pulmonology, where doctors decided to set up an appointment for her at Duke University Medical Center in Durham.

Her appointment was May 14. She stayed at Duke for several days. She had biopsies, which included removal of a wedge of her lung.

When she finally received her diagnosis, doctors said most people with the condition got it from exposure to harsh chemicals or after they had transplants.

“They have no idea how I got it,” Barker, who added that she has never smoked or taken drugs, said in October.

That’s when she was told she needed to replace both lungs. Doctors at Duke told her she could not go back to work.

She went through the lengthy, phased process of getting her name entered on a waitlist for an organ transplant. She was notified on April 1, less than two weeks ago, that she made the list.

To get on the waitlist, Barker went through two days of appointments, testing and observation in mid-September 2020 at Duke. She underwent testing and consultation, as well as a heart catheterization later on.

## **Next phase**

The next phase entailed meeting again with doctors and scheduling another 23 days of rehab and classes.

For the final phase, she had to agree to move to within 10 minutes of Duke for at least six months. And she would need a volunteer, around-the-clock caregiver, such as a family member or friend.

She moved to an apartment in Durham on Feb. 14, about 10 minutes away from Duke.

She has had to undergo a sort of “boot camp” that has included one-on-one physical training to prepare her for the transplant. It has entailed walking, bicycling, weightlifting, strengthening her body.

“They want you to be in top condition,” Barker said. “After 23 days, you graduate.”

The regimen has also included breathing, swallowing and speech exercises, Zoom classes on post-operation topics like diabetes, medications and feeding tubes.

The classes, physical therapy and training do not stop after graduation.

But the toughest part has been moving away from Ringgold, albeit temporarily for the transplant, away from family and friends and the life she has known.

“Between October and now, moving away from home and being away from family and friends, that’s been one of the hardest things for me to deal with,” Barker said.

Before she was listed, she was at least able to come home to Ringgold — where she and her husband still have their house — on the weekends. But that ended April 1.

Her parents have been rotating staying with her in Durham, since someone has to be with her at all times, and her husband takes a couple of vacation days a week from his job to be with her as well.

Unable to work, Barker is covered by her husband’s insurance under his employer.

“That’s why he has to go back and go to work,” she said.

For her husband, Kevin, Tonya’s ordeal has taken a toll on him, as well.



Kevin Barker, left, talks about the challenges he and his wife Tonya Barker face after she was diagnosed with a rare lung condition last summer in October in their Ringgold home.

John Crane

## 'Heartbreaking'

"It's really heartbreaking to see her go through this ..., but I've been able to go and be with her on just about every doctor's appointment and procedure," Kevin said via text message Friday afternoon.

Barker, who has had dozens of surgeries in his abdominal area, back and neck for a variety of ailments in the past dozen years, has seen Tonya act as his caregiver. But over the last year or so, he has had to be hers.

"It's always been that way since we've been married, whether it's me or her going through surgery," he said. "When you have been with someone for 40-plus years and you have to leave your wife in Durham for a few days because of medical insurance, it's really hard."

Following her transplant, Barker will spend several days in an intensive care unit on a ventilator. She will be in the hospital for about a month and will take at least two to three months to recover from the procedure, she said.

As part of the requirement for the transplant, a fundraiser has been scheduled for Barker on May 22. It will include a dinner raffle and auction.

A graduate of Dan River High School, Barker worked for American National Bank for 18 years before starting at Edward Jones about 19 years ago.

The Barkers will move back into their Ringgold home following the transplant.

By John Crane

---

ALERT

## Months after being on a ventilator, Danville woman struggles with COVID-19 impacts

John Crane

Oct 9, 2021



Rebecca Wright, pictured with her husband, Ben, during a vacation at Chincoteague last month, still faces challenges but has improved since being hospital on a ventilator with COVID-19 early this year.

Contributed photos

John Crane

**A**bout 10 months after she was on a ventilator, Danville resident Rebecca Wright still struggles with the aftermath of having COVID-19.

She has to haul oxygen tanks with her wherever she goes, and her lungs are functioning at just 30% to 40%. On top of that, she could end up needing a lung transplant.

This week, she will be evaluated to begin pulmonary rehab.

"It's to hopefully increase that lung function and hopefully repair the damage done by COVID," Wright said during an interview Thursday morning. "If not, a lung transplant may be necessary."

Wright's ordeal began after a family Christmas Eve gathering last year. She had been trepidatious about attending the event in person.

Soon after the get-together, Wright started experiencing chills, aches, fatigue, coughing and heavy congestion. There was no indication during the Christmas Eve event that anyone there had the virus. No one had symptoms.

---

**People are also reading...**

- 1 **Watch now: Storm delivers icy blast to Dan River Region**
  - 2 **Authorities ID victims found in burning Pittsylvania County home as two men from Mexico**
  - 3 **Work begins to remove finishing building at Schoolfield, making way for Danville's new casino**
  - 4 **Hargrave Military Academy names new president**
- 

Within a week after the gathering, Wright had tested positive for COVID-19. Her husband, Ben, also caught the disease but experienced only mild symptoms including tiredness, achiness and slight shortness of breath.

Of the nine who attended the holiday festivities, seven ended up testing positive for COVID-19.

She went to the emergency room at Sovah Health-Danville on Jan. 6 and was put on a ventilator five days later. She was put under a medically induced coma until that month.

Her family went through ups and downs as Rebecca's condition fluctuated. She had pneumonia at one point and she also has asthma.

She was transferred to Select Specialty Hospital in Greensboro, North Carolina, on Feb. 1 before being moved to Novant Health Rehabilitation Hospital in nearby Winston-Salem on Feb. 25.

During her hospitalization, she experienced "ICU psychosis," a condition in which patients in intensive care experience paranoia, delusions, disorientation in time and place, hallucinations, agitation, increased anxiety and other symptoms.

## Today

While she still faces challenges, there definitely has been improvement since she was able to receive the COVID-19 vaccine last spring, Wright said Thursday.

"I attribute a lot of that to getting vaccinated," she said.

She received her first dose at the end of April and a second shot at the end of May. She felt marked improvement after each jab, but she experienced an even bigger boost much later.

"Two months after being fully vaccinated, it was like somebody flipped a switch with my energy levels," Wright said.

She was able to cut back on her oxygen use. She can turn it off when she is relaxing at home, she said.

"I don't think I would have seen that improvement without the vaccine," she said. "That's my opinion as someone who's not medically trained."

Other improvements include being able to run errands by herself and regaining the strength and stamina to carry her oxygen tanks to the car.

"I had to have somebody with me before," Wright said. "It was a challenge to to take the tanks to the car."

She has a six-pack of oxygen tanks, with each tank providing about an hour of oxygen.

But the biggest coup was recently taking a vacation to Chincoteague on the Eastern Shore a month ago. She took 24 tanks of oxygen and a home concentrator that converts room air to pure oxygen.

As for her anxiety — which increased after getting COVID and being released from care — it has improved, Wright said.

"It has definitely gotten better," she said. "That's also helped me to go on my vacation and go out running errands on my own."

However, her energy level is still below normal and remains an issue, she said. She walks with a cane when she is out and still gets dizzy when she turns her head too quickly or looks down for too long.

She was surprised when she learned of her reduced lung capacity, because she thought she was breathing better.

"I may be adjusting to the reduced capacity," she said, adding that the right side of her diaphragm is paralyzed.

Ironically, breathing tests showed that obstruction from her asthma has improved. It's less than it had been pre-COVID, Wright said.

Doctors have told her that she must lose weight or the burden on her heart and lungs will increase, she said. However, they have also told her asthma was what caused her severe reaction to COVID-19, said Wright, whose blood pressure and cholesterol numbers are at medically-desired levels.

## **Psychological toll**

Though her anxiety has eased, hearing about patients in their 30s and 40s contracting COVID-19 and developing serious cases and dying is trying for Wright, since she knows the ordeal all too well.

"Just hearing all these stories in our community ... it's rough to deal with. It's rough to hear it because I know what they are going through," she said. "Knowing it could have been prevented, it has an effect to hear these stories. It affects my mental health. It really kind of takes you back to when you were experiencing it. I start reliving things that I remember."

Wright is likely dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder and depression from her ordeal, she said.

There is also the financial aspect of dealing with COVID-19, said Wright, who returned to her job in information technology with Registry Partners in May.

If it weren't for insurance covering her bills at the time, Wright would have been more than \$1 million in debt for her health care, she said.

"That would have been devastating financially," Wright said. "That's what's facing people, if you get COVID now. The bills are your responsibility."

Through July, she and her husband have paid less than \$1,500 out-of-pocket for Wright's care, she said.

Either way, COVID-19 can seriously alter one's life even if it doesn't lead to death, she said.

"It really uproots your life," Wright said. "I'm only 44 years old, I'm an empty-nester, my son is out of this house. This should be my time. I should be traveling, just enjoying life. But because of the limitations, it's hard to do that. It's just not really possible."

By John Crane

---

EDITOR'S PICK ALERT

## **WATCH NOW: After co-pastors of Danville church lose home to fire, an outpouring of love from community**

**John Crane**

Jun 5, 2021

WATCH NOW: Family rebounds after house fire

Family rebounds after house fire

Jeff Lynch had just finished mowing the grass and was talking to his mom on the phone when he saw smoke in front of the house.

“When I got up and looked, smoke was pouring out of the back of the house,” Lynch said during an interview in front of the home Thursday morning on Olde Hunting Trail off Mount Cross Road where he and his family live.

Flames were coming out of a shed attached to the back of the house, he said. It was right after dinner and he and his family were in the home.

“I ran in and told them the house is on fire, you’ve got to get out,” he said. “The flames were flying.”

“By the time I got the water hose hooked up, I couldn’t even get to the fire, it was so hot,” he said.

The fire was caused by the lawn mower that backfired in the shed, sparking the blaze, said Jeff’s wife, Jackie Lynch.



Jackie and Jeff Lynch have been overwhelmed with support and donations from their church and the community since a fire damaged their home May 25.

John Crane

Since the May 25 fire that heavily damaged the home he shares with Jackie, her 86-year-old mother and their five children from previous marriages, their church and other community members have showered them with food, clothes, money, cards and emotional support.

---

### People are also reading...

- 1 **Suspect, previously facing weapon charge, indicted on first-degree murder count in Danville shooting**
- 2 **Editorial: Interstate 95 winter storm debacle demands scrutiny**
- 3 **Work begins to remove finishing building at Schoolfield, making way for Danville's new casino**
- 4 **Miyares fires 30 in AG's office**

---

Jeff and Jackie Lynch, who have been married since 2015, are co-pastors at Compassion Church on Third Avenue in Danville.

“People have helped us tremendously,” said Jeff, who has lived in the home since 2017.

At just that moment during the interview, a woman driving by shouted from her car, “Love you guys!”

For Jackie, who grew up in the two-story, ranch-style home built by her parents in 1974, the past several days have been especially emotional.

### A 'safe haven'

“This house was always, for me, a safe haven,” Jackie said. “It was always stable.”

The home has also held a special place in the hearts of her kids, who would bring their friends to the home to hang out.

“My kids didn’t go to other people’s houses,” she said. “They always came here.”

On the front of the home, some windows were boarded up while a mattress, ceiling fan and other debris could be seen piled up through another, with backyard trees and the sky visible.

Yellow tape and debris littered the front porch. Inside, insulation and studs were visible amid the destruction, where part of the roof was gone.

But amid the devastation, some family treasures — including Bibles, old love letters written by Jackie’s father to her mom, Jackie’s son’s college degree from George Mason University and Jeff’s baseball cards — were spared, Jackie said.

The Lynches, Jackie’s mother and five of their children are staying at a friend’s home in south Danville. For all the damage their Olde Hunting Trail home, the house is salvageable and should be repaired in about four to six months, Jeff said.

Patty Johnson, who has been a member of Compassion Church for five years, is letting the Lynches and their family stay at her home while she is working in Montana.

For Johnson and the Lynches, the arrangement was fortuitous.

Johnson had just gotten off the phone with Jackie on May 25 when Johnson got a call from her employer, Oklahoma-based Hope Center Ministries, asking her to work for several weeks in Montana. Just minutes later, a mutual friend called Johnson telling her that the Lynches’ home was on fire.

At first, Johnson didn’t believe it since she had just finished talking to Jackie.

“I said, ‘No it is not. I just got off the phone with her, everything is fine,’” she recalled.

But when she called Jackie, she found out it was no joke.

“I jumped up and took off over there,” said Johnson, who had recently let Jackie’s mother, who has dementia, stay with her while the Lynches went on vacation.



Windows are boarded up at the home Jackie and Jeff Lynch after a May 25 fire damaged the house.

John Crane



A mattress, ceiling fan and other debris are seen piled up through a window, with backyard trees and the sky visible after a May 25 fire damaged the home of Jackie and Jeff Lynch.

John Crane

When Johnson arrived at the home after enduring diverted traffic, she ran up to Jackie's mother and hugged her. But she didn't recognize Johnson at first.

"She said, 'Who is this?'" Johnson said. "She looked me square in the face."

When Johnson reminded her, Jackie's mother said, "Patty, Patty, Patty, everything I own is in that house," Johnson said.

"I just held her," she said. "You could see the roof falling through the window."

Angela Fitzgerald, chief accountability officer at Compassion Church, recalled the Facetime call she had with Jackie and one of the Lynches' grandchildren just about 10 or 15 minutes before the fire.



Insulation and studs are visible amid destruction caused by a May 25 fire.

John Crane

### **'Surreal' call**

"It was surreal," Fitzgerald said. "The youngest granddaughter, she had just sang 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.'"

Within an hour, dozens of people from the church were at the scene to comfort the Lynches, said Fitzgerald, who drove to their home from where she lives in Gretna.

"People were showing up with coolers of water," she said. "It was just amazing."

The next day, Fitzgerald was inundated with calls from people wanting to know how they could help. A "meal train" has been set up through June 12 that provides food for the Lynches "so that family does not have to worry about feeding themselves so they can concentrate on what's going on at the moment," she said.

“A meal train is an opportunity for people to bring food,” she said, adding that enough clothes have been offered to the Lynches to fill a tractor-trailer truck.

Gift cards are the preferred way to donate, Fitzgerald said. They can be sent to Compassion Church Danville at 215 Third Ave. Danville, VA 24540.

“It has absolutely been a devastating disaster to us, but the love people have shown us...” Jeff Lynch said.

For Jeff, the home has been a place where their grandchildren have played and made memories. The couple is looking forward to the day when they can move back in and make more.

“We’re excited about what it will be when it’s put back together,” Jackie said.

By John Crane

---