Growing up, sisters Heather Kostelnik, 21, and Kaila Sass, 26, of Sheboygan, dreamed of something different than most children. They wanted to breathe effortlessly.

Diagnosed with cystic fibrosis as infants, they’ve spent much of their lives in and out of hospitals, working their way through treatments and trying to stay ahead of the progressive disease. CF is an inherited, chronic disease that causes thick mucus to clog the lungs, obstructing airways and causing infections. It also hinders the body from breaking down and absorbing food.

“I’d always want to get a big hospital room because I didn’t want to be alone,” Heather said, preferring to be with Kaila, who always looked out for her.

The sisters worked with physicians at both Children’s Hospital of Wisconsin and Froedtert & the Medical College of Wisconsin Froedtert Hospital. A strong, collaborative relationship exists between the hospitals, easing the transition as younger patients enter adult pulmonology or need a transplant.

Froedtert Hospital has special programs dedicated to managing patients with CF; pulmonary fibrosis, sarcoidosis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, pulmonary hypertension, and other advanced lung diseases. The team includes physicians who are nationally known for expertise in lung transplantation and pulmonology.

The only program providing lung transplants in eastern Wisconsin, the Transplant Center is a joint program of Children’s Hospital of Wisconsin, Froedtert & the Medical College of Wisconsin and BloodCenter of Wisconsin.

“While lung disease is often associated with smoking, most transplant patients have lung disease because of a genetic disorder or an unclear cause,” said Kenneth Presberg, MD, medical director of lung transplantation and pulmonary hypertension. To combat CF, the medical team uses an evidence-based strategy that includes inhaled medicine to open breathing tubes, antibiotics to fight infection, and a nutritional...
focus. When a patient’s condition worsens despite maximized treatment, lung transplantation is considered.

**A LIFESAVING OPTION**

“When I was in high school, my lungs were in such decline it was hard to do anything,” Heather said. “I was using oxygen full-time.” In 2008, Heather was added to the organ recipient waiting list, and within a month, donor lungs became available.

“For Heather, things had gotten so difficult to manage that transplant was the only alternative,” said George Haasler, MD, FACS, transplant surgeon and surgical director of the End-Stage Lung Disease and Lung Transplant Program. Dr. Haasler, along with cardiothoracic surgeon Mario Gasparrri, MD, led the team that successfully implanted donor lungs into 16-year-old Heather, restoring her ability to breathe.

When news came that Heather’s lung transplant was imminent, Kaila rushed to her sister’s side. A young adult, Kaila had married and moved to Colorado, but was experiencing a serious downturn in her health as well.

“Away from Wisconsin, I didn’t have the continuity of care,” Kaila said. “I also was extremely sick and very skinny.” By July 2012, Kaila, then age 24, was struggling to work and do everyday activities.

“Helping them manage those risks is a strong, multidisciplinary team that provides the integrated, comprehensive care important for a transplant patient’s success.”

According to Dr. Haasler, both sisters’ transplant surgeries and recoveries went very well. “Heather and Kaila did beautifully and bounced back quickly,” he said. “They are both focused on survival and making a future.”

**INTEGRATED TEAM MANAGES CARE**

Grateful to have a new lease on life, the sisters are able to breathe in a way that, as children, they could have only imagined. Now, life as lung transplant patients is a mix of determination, resilience and making choices that lead to optimal health.

“The two main struggles for transplant patients are rejection and infection,” Dr. Dolan said.

The doctors did everything they could on the medical level, and I am responsible for doing everything I can to keep myself healthy.”

“Being able to breathe is the greatest thing,” Kaila added. ■

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**Respiratory Care**

Our pulmonologists and transplant surgeons work together to provide the highest level of care for patients with varying stages of lung disease, including those with advanced disease who may benefit from lung transplantation. Respiratory care services, including evaluation and treatment of many types of respiratory problems, are available at several Froedtert & the Medical College of Wisconsin health centers, clinics and hospital locations including:

- Greenfield — Greenfield Highlands Health Center
- Menomonee Falls — North Hills Health Center
- New Berlin — Moorland Reserve Health Center
- Wauwatosa — Froedtert Hospital campus
- West Bend — St. Joseph’s Health Center

For more information, call 414-805-3666 or 800-272-3666 or visit froedtert.com.