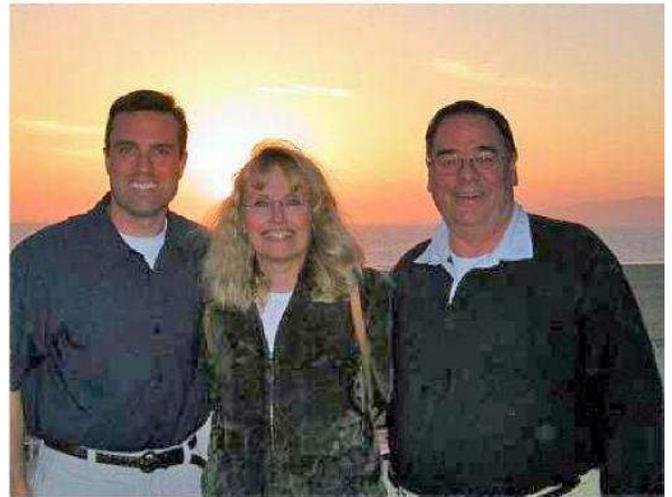


### *Swimmer Profile –Mike Gaw*



Mike with his parents in 2004 before the Los Angeles Marathon

By Elaine Krugman

If there is one thing I can say without a doubt about Georgia Masters Swimming is that we have an abundance of really nice, unassuming members that are full of amazing surprises! Take Mike Gaw, for example. I have competed at meets with him for nearly six years now, and I had no idea he completed an Ironman triathlon! He's actually done nine, but more on that later.

Actually, that wasn't even the most amazing thing I learned about Mike when I interviewed him for this article. Did you know he is also an organ donor? As his story unfolded, all I could say was, "Wow!"

It was 2008 when Mike's mother went into kidney failure. When it became apparent that her condition was irreversible, Mike told his mom he would love to donate one of his kidneys to her. "She turned me down. She said she did not want her health challenges to have a negative impact on my life. I told her, 'Not having my mom alive will have a profoundly negative impact on my life!'," Mike said.

After a year of going through dialysis and suffering a poor quality of life, Mike's mom ultimately got comfortable with the idea of a transplant and receiving Mike's kidney. She had done a lot of research and realized that donating a kidney would be safe for her son, and it wouldn't have the negative impact she first thought.

After going through a full day of extensive testing at UCLA in California, doctors determined Mike was a good match for his mom. He was approved for the transplant in November of 2009 and was faced with some tough decisions.

As Mike explained, "At that time, I was one Ironman away from completing my 'Ironman Continent Quest,' which was competing in an Ironman triathlon on all six continents where they are held. I was signed up for Ironman South Africa, scheduled for April 2010, and my mom knew that. She was grateful that I wanted to give her a kidney, but she didn't want to prevent me from realizing this dream that I had worked so long and hard to achieve and was so close to completing. I told her they host that race every year, so it was not a big deal to wait. But, she was also afraid donating a kidney would make it harder for me to race an Ironman. I reminded her that it was more important for her to get the transplant, because I didn't want her to be on dialysis any longer than she had to be. She raised the issue with the transplant team, and they said there would be no adverse impacts by delaying the transplant until after Ironman South Africa."

Ultimately, however, the transplant was moved up two months to March 2010 due to insurance-related issues. “I ended up having to postpone Ironman South Africa for a year, which was best anyway because my mom got her transplant sooner and my parents got to resume a normal life more quickly,” Mike said about their decision.

The transplant was a great success, and Mike was able to return to training – a good thing, considering what was scheduled later that year. As Mike recalled, “In the days following surgery, my college roommate (a multiple qualifier for the Boston marathon) called me to check in on how my mom and I were doing. In one of those conversations, he apparently asked my permission to allow him to sign me up for the Athens Marathon in Greece, seven months after surgery on what would mark the 2,500th anniversary of Pheidippides’ legendary run. He was doing it with a bunch of friends and wanted me to join. Still being heavily drugged post-surgery and highly impressionable, I was happy to agree, but have no memory of the conversation. In the end, I did the race and had my best marathon time on a very hard course. After a flat initial 10K, there was a 14-mile climb up and over the mountains from Marathon to Athens, before an excruciatingly steep, downhill final 10K that concluded with a half lap around the track in the ancient Olympic stadium. It’s no wonder Pheidippides died after that run!! It was a hot and hard day, but one of the coolest experiences of my life! I was happy JT took advantage of my foggy state and talked me into a race that sold out just days after he signed us up!”

Completing a marathon is quite an accomplishment in itself, but doing so with only one kidney? Impressive! A marathon run is only the last leg of an Ironman triathlon, though, and Mike still needed to compete in Ironman South Africa – with one kidney – to complete his six-continent quest. Despite a serious dehydration set-back during training, he was able to compete in the South Africa Ironman in April 2011. Hot conditions during the race caused another bout with serious dehydration, however, so Mike thought it best to walk the final twenty miles of the marathon. “It was worthwhile, because I finished my ‘Ironman Continent Quest’ and stayed healthy in the process. And, because I finished as late as I did, the women’s race winner, and one of the greatest Ironman athletes to ever live, Chrissy Wellington (who ran the fastest marathon of the day – faster than any man!), was on hand to put my finisher’s medal around my neck. That was special not only because of who she is, but also because I had a HUGE crush on her. (Neither of us was married at the time!)” Mike said of his last Ironman – completed with only one kidney! Amazing!

On a more serious note, finishing the Ironman, even though it was his slowest by more than two hours, meant completing his seven-year Ironman Continent Quest. “Being able to achieve that goal that I had set in 2004 and being able to do it on one kidney – safely – meant a lot,” this incredible athlete said modestly.

After trying to wrap my mind around the enormity of Mike’s accomplishments, I wondered just how he got involved in competing in triathlons in the first place. As he explained, “I grew up in Southern California where swimming was very much a part of my life... Just exercising for fitness was getting a bit boring. I needed something to motivate me, so I looked into triathlons and Masters swimming as a way of meeting people and getting re-engaged in competition to help motivate me to elevate my training and push myself more. As I got into it, I started to develop more ambitious goals and used that as motivation.”

“I got roped into doing my first Ironman in 2004 (in Zurich, Switzerland) by a bunch of friends I had come to know through triathlons. Peer pressure is a powerful thing! I had honestly thought I would never do one. I remember watching ABC’s coverage of Ironman Hawaii as a kid growing up thinking that those people were crazy for wanting to do it, and I couldn’t believe they were actually doing it! The distances were mind-boggling to me, and they still are, to be perfectly honest. But, I gulped the Kool-Aid. I took my training very seriously, and I had an absolutely amazing experience. I couldn’t believe I had done it, and I was so proud of the accomplishment, because it’s a crazy long distance. It’s 140.6 miles. It starts with a swim of 2.4 miles, then goes on to a 112-mile bike, then a full marathon. Any one of those is daunting enough, but to string three extreme events back-to-back-to-back is truly crazy! I loved it! I loved the process



of training, I loved the race, and the whole lifestyle that it brought me. I knew I would do it again, and I have always loved to travel. The fact that I did my first overseas in Switzerland was really special, and I thought I would love to do one somewhere else in the world,” Mike explained.

This globe-trotting triathlete ended up doing a total of nine Ironman triathlons on all six continents where they are held, two of which were witnessed by his parents. They flew all the way to Switzerland for their son’s first Ironman in 2004, and also joined extended family in cheering him on in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, where he competed in his second Ironman with several of his friends in 2005. The other Ironmans he completed were: Florida (2005), Brazil (2006), Canada (2006), Austria (2007), Australia (2008), Malaysia (2009), and South Africa (2011). The Malaysia Ironman was completed under the most difficult conditions. According to Mike, “That was the hottest race I did. With humidity factored in, it was 120 degrees (water was in the upper 80s), but I had one of my best races there.”

Training for those Ironman races required a lot of time of this dedicated athlete. Mike swam with the Masters group at Dynamo (coached by Maria Thrash) on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays; rode his bike on a trainer on Tuesdays, ran on Thursdays, did a long bike ride with a transition run on Saturdays, and did a long run on Sundays, while working weight training in a couple days each week. He would take only one day off each month! “It was essentially a full-time job on top of a full-time job (as a real estate attorney),” Mike said of his packed schedule during the years of his quest, adding, “I would never do it again [laughing]. But I’m glad I did it!” As for me, it exhausts me just thinking about it!

Over the past couple of years, Mike’s training schedule has been a lot more low-key, swimming three times a week, about 3,000 yards per session. However, he plans on returning to his first love of swimming by ramping up his schedule and returning to Master’s workouts at Dynamo. “I miss it a lot. I miss the coaching; Maria Thrash is incredible, her workouts are challenging and fun, and the people are amazing as well, and I want to return to that. That is all part of my goals for 2018,” Mike said.

Although triathlons are a memory for Mike, he is very much focused on his swimming, and he still does some running and weightlifting. Over the past six years, he has competed in a grueling lifeguard endurance event in Huntington Beach, California and plans on competing in it again this year.

In addition, he will be traveling to Utah for a competition. “This year I am particularly focused on competing in all of the swimming events at the Transplant Games of America, which are in Salt Lake City in August. That will be very special and unique,” Mike said, adding that he will be competing in the Living Donor Division. “I think it’s great that they have opened [the Games] up to organ donors, because it promotes greater awareness of the benefits of organ donation in a way that spotlights a key demographic that desperately needs expanding and dispels myths that organ donation is detrimental to the lives of living donors. It’s also a great way to meet people, share inspiring stories and to celebrate life.”

You will also see Mike at the St. Pat’s meet and other local competitions throughout the year. “I read the newsletter every month, cover to cover. I enjoy the articles, learning about others and their achievements, and looking ahead to the various meets, seeing how many of those I can make. I enjoy getting to know and hanging out with other swimmers and their families, and I love competing and pushing myself, seeing what I can do. That inevitably leads me to create newer, more ambitious goals. I look forward to ramping that up this year,” Mike said.

In addition to competition, Mike looks forward to continuing his volunteer work as a swim coach and triathlon coach with the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society's Team in Training Program, where he coaches all levels of triathletes in all triathlon distances.

Between his full-time work as Lead Global Counsel for Real Estate at Ernst & Young, volunteer coaching, training, competing, enjoying time with his wife, Gina, this ambitious swimmer has a lot on his plate!

As Mike explained about his busy schedule and past achievements, "I believe the greatest limiter is the negative self-talk – whether from others or ourselves – that we let ourselves believe. It's a lot easier to think you can't do something than to believe that you can do it. But, if you tell yourself you can do it, if you make the time and the commitment, and find the resources you need to help you get there, you can achieve anything. That's how I did those Ironmans and long-distance swims like the Waikiki Roughwater Swim, dozens of 5K swims and the St. Croix 5-miler. The confidence that you gain and the pride that you realize in your accomplishments are far reaching and apply in all aspects of your life, which is one of the reasons why I love swimming so much."