

Breathing Easy

Photography by Kelly LaDuke

ASK KELLY HELMS HOW OLD SHE IS AND SHE'LL probably say 5½. That's how long it has been since she received the lung transplant that saved her life. "I call November 4th my re-birthday," says 33-year-old Helms, referring to the day she endured twelve hours of surgery enabling her to breathe again.

No, Helms didn't smoke. She didn't have cystic fibrosis, which often affects lung capacity. Helms' story is about a young, healthy woman faced with a rare illness that almost took her life.

Always physically fit, she started noticing a shortness of breath during her regular aerobic workouts in 1988. A few trips to a pulmonary specialist didn't reveal anything serious. Adult asthma was the diagnosis.

When inhalers and medication didn't help, Helms sought help from her family physician. During one of her visits, the doctor asked if he could take an X-ray of her lungs. It revealed a mass about the size of an orange. She was admitted to the hospital the next day, and began an uphill fight for her life.

Several tests later, Helms was diagnosed with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis – a disease which scars the lungs and eventually destroys their ability to function. She had lost about 20 pounds, tired easily and had to take steroids to help her breathe.

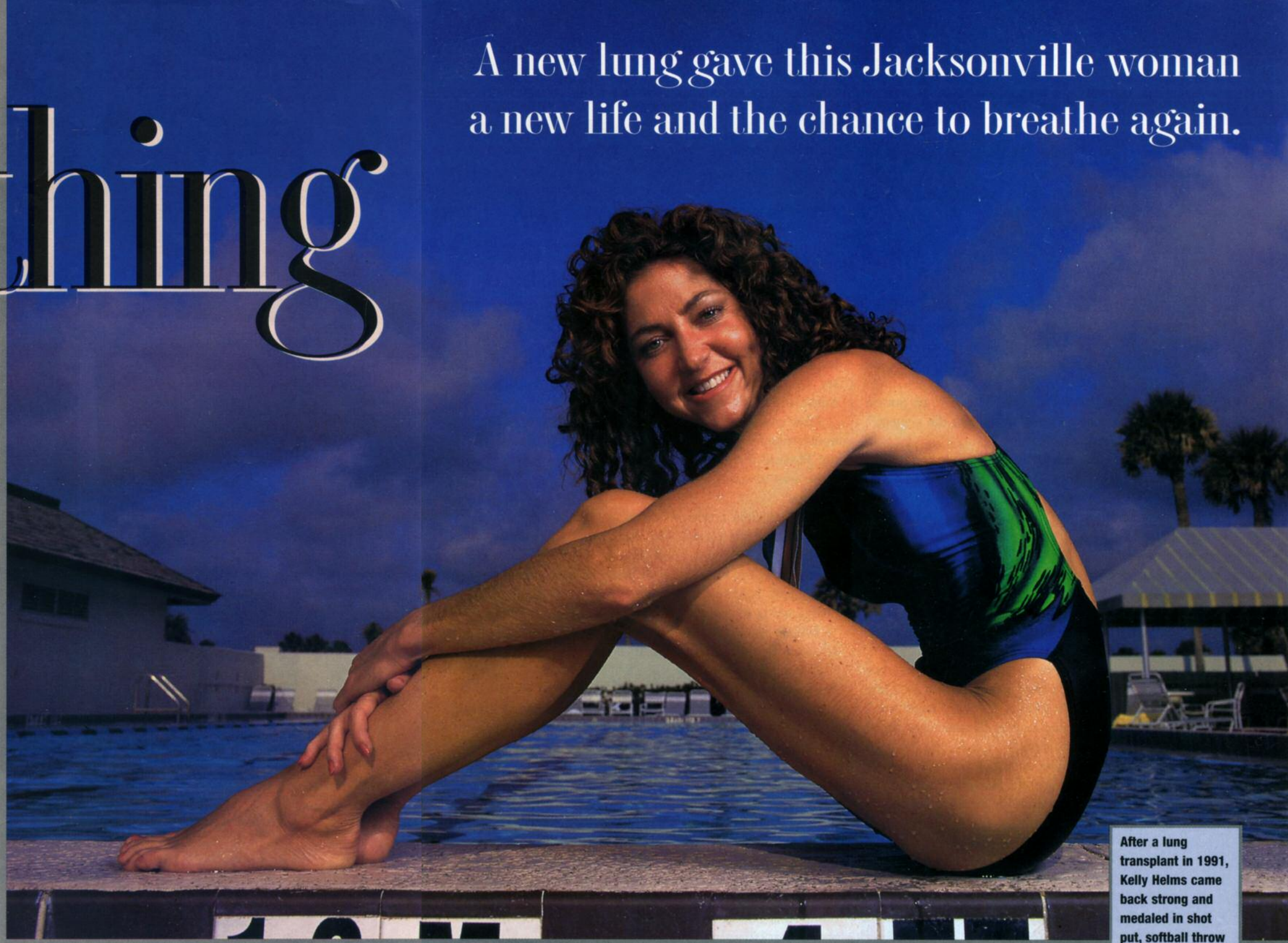
Helms recalls confronting her doctor and hoping for words of comfort. He responded to her plea for help by telling her she needed to face the fact that she would die

young, and perhaps she should talk to a therapist. That was her last visit to that doctor.

Instead of giving up, Helms and her family made an appointment at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. "That was the first time a lung transplant was mentioned as a possible cure," says Helms, and after a 10-day medical evaluation, she was officially listed for a lung transplant in early 1991.

"They gave me a beeper and told me to keep a bag

A new lung gave this Jacksonville woman a new life and the chance to breathe again.



After a lung transplant in 1991, Kelly Helms came back strong and medaled in shot put, softball throw and swimming in the 1996 U.S. Transplant Games.

packed so I'd be ready to go," she says. "I felt like an expectant mother."

The next few months showed no improvement, and steroids were supplemented by a huge canister of oxygen she hid at home. After waiting on the list for five months, Helms got a call from Mayo urging her to look into other options. "They were afraid I would die waiting," she explains. Helms took Mayo's advice and got on a new list, this time with the University of North Carolina Hospitals

in Chapel Hill, where organ transplants were becoming routine.

In the meantime, everyday life became harder. Determined to work full-time, Helms grew so tired that she would escape to the rest room just to sit and catch her breath. She couldn't walk up stairs or for any short distance without huffing and puffing, even standing for more than a few minutes wore her out. "I brought a portable oxygen tank to work, and I had a handicapped

sign for my car. I felt like my independence was slowly slipping away.”

In August of 1991, Helms, along with her mother, left her Ponte Vedra home and moved to the UNC campus where she joined others in the lung transplant program. Close friendships were formed as the group waited and hoped for a matching donor. “I felt comfortable being around others with the same condition,” she says. “We would all take our oxygen tanks and go to the movies.”

As summer turned to fall, Helms grew weaker. In September, she was 40 pounds below her normal weight and didn’t have enough energy to eat. As she waited for the news of a donor, her friends in the program went in for surgery. Then in October, her lungs collapsed, landing her in the hospital for two weeks.

“One of my doctors explained that if I had to be put on a ventilator, I would be too weak to survive the surgery.” Helms was running out of time.

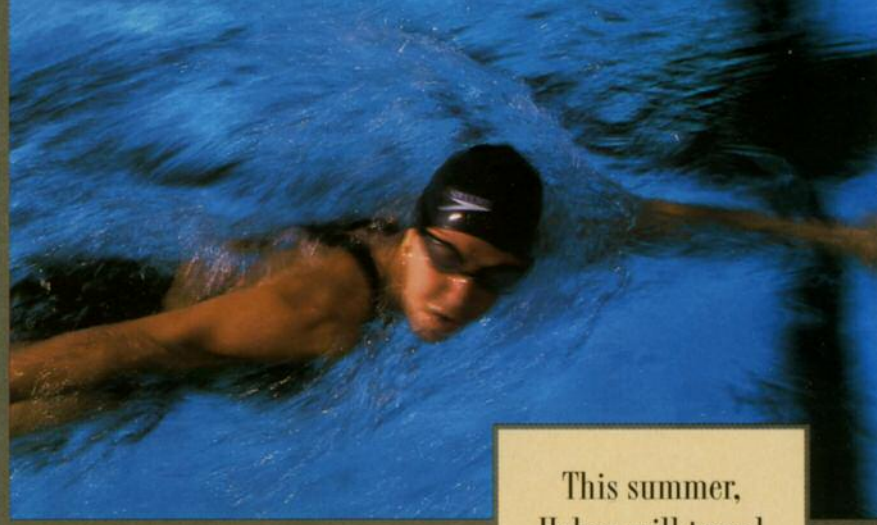
“I returned to my campus apartment on a Friday and lay in bed. Each time I inhaled it was like hitting a wall. On Saturday night, I thought I was going to die. I was so tired. I felt like I was drowning.” By this time, she could no longer bathe herself or brush her own hair, and she was down to 87 pounds.

The following Sunday night, as she lay in bed too frightened to sleep, the phone rang. “We think we have lungs for you,” said the voice on the line. Helms rolled out of bed, oxygen tank in tow, and walked over to wake her parents.

“I remember saying good-bye to my mother before they rolled me in to surgery, telling her I would see her in a few hours,” says Helms. “It didn’t occur to me that I might not.”

Twenty-four hours later, she awoke. “I remember opening my eyes, surprised I was alive.”

Helms received one new lung during the surgery and the other was used to save another life. But even with a new lung in place, her battle was far from over. Helms’ recov-



This summer, Helms will travel to Australia to compete in the World Transplant Games.

ery was complicated – she remained on a ventilator for seven weeks while others in the program were transplanted and released.

After enduring two additional surgeries, Helms was finally freed from the ventilator. Physical therapy came next. “I remember my first exercise was to stand for 10 seconds. That was exhausting,” she says.

Today, Helms works full-time as a corporate meeting planner for Barnett Bank. She also teaches a strength training class three times a week, and is committed to telling others about the importance of being an organ donor.

“I really believe things happen for a reason,” she explains, trying to make sense of what some call misfortune. “I believe I survived all of this to be a spokesperson – an advocate to encourage people to become organ donors.”

A regular speaker for the Neilsen Organ Transplant Foundation, Helms is on the board of “Second Wind”, an organization that provides support for lung transplant patients. “There are currently 2,000 people who are waiting for lungs, and less people than ever are donors,” she explains. “There is nothing worse than seeing someone die waiting. That could have been me.”

Along with her purpose, her perspective on life has changed. “I don’t worry about little things. I live my life one day at a time. I just think about today and try to do what makes me happy and healthy right now.”

Last summer, Helms competed in the U. S. Transplant Games, medaling in the shot put, softball throw and swimming. This summer, she’ll travel to Australia to compete in the World Transplant Games.

“I don’t dwell on my illness and I won’t put my life on hold,” Helms says. “I choose to live with my condition and not in it.”

Helms has had four bouts with rejection and has had CMV, a virus that can be fatal. As she will tell you, she has traded an illness for “a life of medical maintenance,” referring to the 14 pills she takes each day.

Still, she refuses to slow down, just as she refused to give up during the many long nights waiting and praying for a lung. “I am living because I am living.” **jw**

You Can Be An Organ Donor... Here's How:

There are more than 52,000 people in the country waiting for an organ, and a new patient is added to the list every 18 minutes. You can become a donor by requesting the words “organ donor” be added to your driver's license through your local division of motor vehicles. Or call 1-800-535-4483 to receive a donor card. Then be sure to tell those closest to you about your decision.

“Telling your family you are a donor is just as important as becoming one,” explains Kelly Helms. “They are usually the people making that decision, so they need to know about your desire to donate.” Up to 75 people can benefit from just one organ and tissue donor.