

Benji’s Story: How friendships, transplants and pandemic disinformation can dramatically alter the course of our lives.

20 years ago, a young Benji Lafitte had his promising basketball career cut short by kidney failure, and he would go on to depend on dialysis for the next two decades. After almost giving up on the transplant process, an old basketball rival persuaded Benji to engage again with a transplant center.

Benji joins us on this episode of Kidney Transplant Conversations to share his long journey to transplant with us, and he also remembers with gratitude his friend and mentor Chris Osbourne, the individual who had helped him try for a transplant again. Chris was another kidney transplant recipient, but he hesitated to get vaccinated, and his life was recently lost to the COVID-19 pandemic. We discuss some of the misinformation that can contribute to vaccination decisions, and Benji highlights the importance of never giving up on yourself and your health.

This episode of Kidney Transplant Conversations is dedicated to the memory of Chris Osbourne.

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Transcript

Host: Welcome to Kidney Transplant Conversations, our regular podcast exploring diverse experiences, and quality care delivery of kidney transplant. I’m Rolf Taylor, your host, and series producer. Many thanks to all the participants and advisors and our underwriter Veloxis, who all helped make this podcast possible. All views and opinions expressed in this podcast reflect those of the participants. So today, we feature a personal story from a transplant recipient, Benji Lafitte who grew up in downtown Los Angeles, and planned from a young age to study criminal justice and play basketball. He soon earned a strong reputation as a talented shooting guard, and was approached by numerous colleges, before attending schools in California and Iowa. At that time Benji started experiencing some telltale signs of a kidney condition, and so began his 19-year journey of dialysis that eventually led to a kidney transplant. Along the way, Benji would experience the disappointment of a transplant falling through, and he thought perhaps he was destined to stay on dialysis. But then Benji was mentored by another kidney transplant recipient, an old rival from his basketball days, who he says changed his life by persuading him to join the transplant program at UCLA, where he was treated by Dr. Jeffrey Veale. In this episode, Benji shares his kidney transplant story with us, discusses the importance of not giving up on yourself, and he talks about the loss of his good friend and mentor, Chris.

Host: So Benji, I've been really looking forward to hearing your story and you are a pretty, recent kidney transplant recipient, aren't you?

Benji: Yeah. Yeah. I got a kidney transplant on June 29th and my sister's birthday is actually on the 30th, so she was pretty excited about that.

Host: You're a patient with Dr. Veale, who is also on the podcast.

Benji: Dr. Veale is an amazing surgeon. I mean, I can't say enough about Dr. Veale. Dr. Veale is a special human being.

Host: So, tell me, what is it that makes you see Dr. Veale as being so particularly special?

Benji: Because every doctor I've had, and I've had a lot of doctors, every doctor hasn't made me feel as comfortable as he did. Like, they'll talk to you about the diagnosis or you're going to have surgery, the whole time every time I had a conversation with him, it was like, I knew him for years. He had that vibe to him. Ain't too many like Dr. Veale, that's all I can really say about him. He's a special guy.

Host: You know, it's funny. When I interviewed him for the podcast, he's so good at connecting with you and then he just tunes into what's important.

Benji: Yeah. Dr. Veale, that's my man right there.

Host: He's fantastic.

Benji: He's good people.

Host: Well, look, I want to ask you to share your whole story with our audience, because you were a long time waiting for a transplant or you were a long time on dialysis. And I really think it would be helpful and insightful if you can share a little bit about what happened on that journey, which was I guess it started, I think you told me over 20 years ago. Could you tell us a little bit about, who you are, where you grew up?

Benji: Well, my full name is Benjamin Lafitte, but I go by Benji, my family knows me best by BJ, but I grew up in Los Angeles, California. I went to Washington High School. It was a pretty rough neighborhood, growing up, there was gang activity, there was a lot of different things going on. Either you were in school trying to get to college or you were going with the wrong crew, or you were going or playing sports. And I was trying to get to college and playing sports.

Host: So, whereabouts in Los Angeles is that?

Benji: Actually, I grew up off of 104th & Normandy. It's like right down the street from Washington High School on a 108th & Dinker. That's like another street over. And I used to walk to school every day, you know, through bad neighborhoods. Let's just say a lot of gang violence. So, you had to watch yourself, but it was fun.

Host: So, you had to keep your head down a little bit?

Benji: Oh yeah, definitely.

Host: And you were aiming to get to college, what were you looking to study?

Benji: Criminal justice. That's always been a passion of mine.

Host: Fantastic.

Benji: Yeah. I wanted to do something in the criminal justice field.

Host: What happened with college?

Benji: Well, growing up in LA, I was one of the highly ranked shooting guards in my class and I was recruited by a lot of colleges at that time, and I believe I was leaning more close to North Carolina State, but my SAT, I didn't get a high enough score. So, I went to a JC up north in Sacramento, I think I was only there for like maybe a semester. And then after the season was over, I left because I didn't really see, I mean, it was my team, but I got there late, I got to that school late. I think I was probably a week or two weeks late for orientation and they already had their team set when I got there. So, I had to crack the starting lineup, when I got there, I was like probably the fifteenth man, but I mean, I knew what I could do on the floor. So, I ended up actually cracking the starting lineup and becoming the man on that team. So, I was a go-to man, and I had went there, like I said, almost a week and a half late, but it was a good experience for me. I ended up in Iowa that was my last college destination because after Sierra College in Rockland, California, I went to College of the Desert and I ended up breaking my ankle, so I took a medical red shirt.

So, I think that was 2000, 2001, I played and that's when my kidneys started failing me at the College of the Desert. I would wake up with my face swollen and I didn't know what was going on with me at the time. And then I would also urinate in the toilet, and it would be bubbles and I didn't understand why there was bubbles in the toilet. It was like, I poured some dishwashing liquid in the toilet as many bubbles that was in the toilet, but I was peeing out the protein.

Host: I think they call it frothy urine, right?

Benji: Yeah.

Host: How bad was that? Was that really noticeable to you, what were you thinking?

Benji: Honestly, at that time, from me breaking my ankle and red shirting, I think my playing weight was like because I'm like 6'3", 6'4". My playing weight in high school was like 205 and I gained probably about 20 pounds. So, I was like 225, 230. At that time, I started to go on a diet because I wanted to lose weight and get back to my playing weight. So, at that time, my face started to swell, and my leg started to swell, and I had no clue what was going on. I thought it was the diet that I was on. So, I changed my diet and it continued and I went to go see a doctor. The first doctor, all he did was give me water pills, he's like, oh, you're retaining water, but he didn't know exactly why. So, he gave me some water pills that helped me urinate a little more but come to find out my kidneys were failing me, but I had no clue at that time.

Host: How long did it take before you actually went to see a kidney specialist?

Benji: You know what? I was living that basketball dream. So, I was kind of being naive to what was going on with me. When I was at Collage of the Desert, the first five games I didn't play, they didn't let me play because I been wanting to find out what was going on with me physically. So, imagine sitting out a whole year with a broken ankle and then you come back and then you got another setback with the swelling and then with the weight gain and everything. So, I had no clue what was going on with me, so I had to sat out the first five games, but the first game back I played really well. I had like 18 and like five boards, you know, I hit a couple of three pointers. I played real well and I wasn't in shape at all, but it was just instinct from playing.

Host: That's such a tough road, isn't it being an athlete and then having something like that happen to you, I just can't imagine how hard and how disappointing that must have been.

Benji: It was because I went from being, like I said, ranked in the state of California, you know, competing with everybody in my class and I was dunking on a lot of people that you see in the NBA now. They just retired that the biggest one that I say that I actually dunked on was Matt Barnes. We were playing his team in Fresno, you know, and I caught him on a break and put him on a poster. But everything happens for a reason, you know? I definitely believe that.

Host: Yeah. And there's a fork in the road and who knows what would've happened if you'd gone down near the fork, nobody knows right. Could have been better, could have been worse.

Benji: That is correct, sir.

Host: You got diagnosed as having chronic kidney disease and what were your kind of options, then, health wise or treatment wise?

Benji: Health wise or treatment wise? Well, they automatically told me, because like I said, when I was in Iowa, I just totally ignored that it was something wrong with me, and I went to the University of Iowa and when I got there my body completely shut down. The reason that I knew something was seriously wrong with me is that we ran the mile, and I came in dead last, like our seven footers came in before me. I came in, I'm going to say about almost seven minutes and everybody else was there waiting on me and they were clapping it up for me. And as soon as I got to the middle of the floor, my whole body just cramped up, like seized up, I was like in a big ball on the floor. So, they called and the ambulance to come get me and ran test on me at the hospital and they told me that my kidneys were at 11% at this time.

Host: Wow. 11%? And you were how old at that point?

Benji: I was 21, about to be 22.

Host: Wow.

Benji: I remember vividly, because right before that happened to me, my grandfather passed. So, I had to fly back home to go to his funeral and then fly back to Iowa to be there for school and basketball.

Host: Had you had any other family members, any ancestors that had had similar problems or was it just out of the blue?

Benji: I mean, I don't believe it was out of the blue because actually I was on dialysis before my auntie, rest in peace to my auntie, Shirley. Love you. Yeah. I was on dialysis before her, so I think I probably had her beat by, I want to say probably five years. So, she was probably on like about a good 15 years. So, my first five years and she came in right after my first five years. So, I had her by five years.

Host: And she had the same condition?

Benji: Yeah. She was on dialysis for 15 years and we just buried her like last year.

Host: Oh, I'm so sorry.

Benji: Yeah, she was a special woman, she was a very special woman, my favorite auntie. Rest in peace, Auntie Shirley. I love you.

Host: We just lose so many people to chronic kidney disease.

Benji: Yep.

Host: It's heartbreaking.

Benji: That's why like every day I wake up, if I'm not saying it in my head, I'm saying it out loud, thank you for opening my eyes up because I could have been gone a long time ago.

Host: You must have been doing something, right, because you were on a dialysis for what, 20 years?

Benji: I'm going to say like 19.5, it's about to be 20. So, I'll just round it off with the point 5. So, I say 20 years, but it was like, a good 19.5 years.

Host: When you started with dialysis, your kidneys were, I think you said like 10 or 11%?

Benji: Yeah.

Host: How did you do that for 20 years? Did you keep up an exercise regimen? Did you eat great food? I mean, how did you do that for 20 years? You look great now.

Benji: Yeah, I mean, I give it to God. I was taking all my meds and eating what I was supposed to eat. I was on a low phosphorous diet, so anything with high phosphorous, I couldn't eat potatoes, cheese, tomatoes, peanuts, stuff like that, bananas stuff that I really love.

Host: All the good stuff.

Benji: I had to eat it in moderation, so it was what it was, but I like to think I mastered my diet. My levels and my lab would be off sometimes and then I would just adjust what I was eating by ear.

Host: And during all of that time did you stay connected with athletics?

Benji: I actually did. I would still go to the gym and play, just growing up in LA, like if you were in a hoop circle and you were like, I don't want to say upper echelon, but like the top of that hoop class, then everybody knew each other pretty much. We kind of ran in circles, we knew of each other, or we played in camps together or we played against each other, like our whole lives pretty much. I had so many friends just playing basketball that I played with AAU. And I was like young, 12, 11, like a lot of them stayed playing ball and I played against them in high school and stuff. And I'm still in contact with a lot of those guys now believe it or not.

Host: So, it's like a lifelong network?

Benji: Yeah, it's kind of like a brotherhood, almost, you know. We all keep in contact and that's a good thing.

Host: But I'm curious as to why you didn't explore the option of getting a kidney transplant sooner or maybe you did?

Benji: Actually, I did with two different places, and it took them like nine months to even start the bloodwork. So, I was kind of like frustrated with the situation and the same thing with when I was supposed to get the transplant, I got flaked on twice by the donor. So, it kind of threw me into a spiral and I was kind of like down for a few years, and I didn't want to do it anymore. I didn't want to try to get a kidney, I was kind of deterred about getting the kidney.

Host: How long ago was that?

Benji: Probably about eight to nine years ago.

Host: And were you looking for a living donor?

Benji: I had a friend, I had two friends actually, I went to college with them, and they said they would give me a kidney, but there were other reasons why they couldn't give me a kidney, but I had no clue. I spoke to one of their family members and they said they weren't in the right mind state to even give me a kidney and I totally understood, but that's what happened.

Host: Huge commitment, isn't it?

Benji: Yeah, no, it is. It is.

Host: I'm getting to know more and more about this whole process. And it seems like in the last few years there have been quite a lot of new laws and policy and opportunities that make it easier for people to give a living donation kidney than maybe five or 10 years ago?

Benji: Yeah.

Host: Hopefully, some of those barriers that were affecting your possible donor back then have been removed now and maybe, hopefully, it's easier financially or whatever.

Benji: First off, people are scared to give a piece of their body. They think, oh, can I live with one kidney? You know, they're not informed that you can live with one kidney and then they're scared like, will, I die from the operation. It's a simple procedure, you know, but if you've never had surgery, I totally understand why you thinking like, oh, I might die or can I live with one kidney? I totally understand that but when you care about somebody, stuff like that don't matter.

Host: And then, after that time where it didn't work out, you kind of stepped back from that kind of engaging in that process. It sounds like it was such a rollercoaster, and it must be hard to ask, it feel hard to ask people.

Benji: Yeah, it is, it definitely is. What's crazy is that none of my siblings was a match. None of them that was the crazy part for me, so it was kind of like, wow, I figured either my brother or one of my sisters or somebody would be a match, but I got totally different blood type than all of them.

Host: Yeah. And of course, what Dr. Veal is doing now is he's found a way around that with these swaps.

Benji: Yeah. I like that with UCLA. Hey, I pray UCLA. It took me three months to get a kidney transplant, three months. And when I got the call, I couldn't believe it.

Host: Fantastic.

Benji: I was sitting there watching the NBA playoffs last year, actually I was watching the Sonic game. I forget who they were playing. When I got that call, I remember that call like it was yesterday. I couldn't believe it. It was kind of surreal and they asked me could I be there by I think they said seven and it was like already four or five and I zoomed down there. I made it in time.

Host: So, you had two hours to get down to the hospital?

Benji: Yeah. And if you know LA traffic, like I know LA traffic, it was a mission getting there.

Host: I imagine. Yeah, you try and do half of the stuff in the car on the way. Oh, wow. So, tell us a little bit about that, because you mentioned that you'd had some advice from a friend who really encouraged you to join the UCLA program?

Benji: Yeah, I got some advice from my friend, Chris Osborne - rest in peace. You know what I'm saying? That's my brother. That dude, I believe he was an angel.

Host: What did he say to you?

Benji: I spoke to him, and he was still on dialysis at that time, and I was still on dialysis at that time. And I'd probably say it was like at least five years ago and I saw him on Facebook, that's how we linked up. I saw him on Facebook, and he was actually on dialysis, and I left him a message and I in-boxed him. That's how we exchanged numbers. He went to Westchester; I went to Washington, and we were rivals in basketball. But he was like, yeah, I'm fixing to get a transplant soon. He told me, and I was like, really? And I told him how long I have been on dialysis, and he was like, wow, that's crazy. And he was like, bro, make sure you keep my

contact. He said, once I get my transplant, I'm going to put you in line to get your transplant and he stayed true to those words. You know, he didn't have to look me up or call me and make sure that I was going to my doctor's appointments or speaking to this coordinator or none of that, but he did all that, like every day. I got a call from him daily.

Host: Wow. So, he took it upon himself to kind of coach you and mentor you or give you some accountability.

Benji: Yeah, went to the same place, same doctor, Dr. Veale. Dr. Veale and Chris were pretty good friends, and Chris was telling me about Dr. Veale the whole time and then he plugged me with Marcy. Marcy is the coordinator, he plugged me with her. And once he plugged me with both of them, I spoke to both of them, and it went by fast, and I couldn't believe it. Like I said, within three months I had that kidney and I've been dialysis free for five and a half months now. Chris played a big part in me getting the kidney and me just looking at life different and wanting to live to be here. I mean, the biggest reason was my kids, my babies, but Chris, he definitely was there and helped me a lot.

Host: What did he say to you that really put you back on that getting a transplant track?

Benji: He said numerous things, just a lot of encouraging words. I would talk to Chris, like I said, at least once or twice a week. If I wouldn't talk to him, he would leave me a message and I would call him back accordingly. But he always left voice messages, I have voice messages of him now on my phone still. When I got the call to get the transplant, he was more excited than I was like, I wish I could have played that voicemail for you. Like he was so ecstatic. He was like, "Man, I feel like screaming I'm so happy for you." He was genuinely just a good person. He looked out for everybody, and he has a brand called, 'Life Altered', and man, he definitely altered my life for sure. You know what I'm saying? He touched a lot of other people like that too, like I said, he was an angel in my eyes. Soon as I got my transplant he was gone because he passed away from COVID. I think I was in the hospital seven days. I'm going to say seven days, exactly and out of those seven days, he was at my bedside in my room five days out of that seven. So, when I say he was there, he was there, yeah, that was a special dude. I think the last time I spoke to him was like on a Thursday. He called and told me he had COVID. I think I was already home by that time. He called and told me he had COVID, we joked about it, he was like, "Yeah Benji, we strong, me and you, we strong." And I told him, yeah, you going to make it through that. And he didn't. COVID, you know, he didn't get the booster shot or the other two so, for him to go out like that. And I remember distinctly telling him not to go. He said, "Okay, I'm not going to go. Okay, you're right." So, whatever happened from then. So, when I said it to him, until that time he went, I couldn't tell you, I think he was just trying to build his brand bigger, and he wasn't really thinking with his health mind. He was a very intelligent person, but he was a people person, first and foremost. He was always the life of the party. Everybody loved him.

Host: I'm so sorry that you lost your close friend and what a blow that must have been to you just after your surgery.

Benji: It was. It was.

Host: What a loss that is?

Benji: It was a huge blow, because we had planned to chill and party, just do buddy things together, just chill out, maybe throw some hoops.

Host: Both transplanted, so you're set free, right?

Benji: Pretty much, and like I said he looked out for me in that aspect. Like he was he was on it. He almost wanted the kidney more than I did. I wanted the kidney bad so imagine how he was pushing me to get it. He willed me to get it. I wanted to get it, but he helped me so much you know.

Host: You and he were rivals on the court right. So, he wanted to keep that rivalry going right as well as the friendship?

Benji: Yeah. He was good people. He was just good people. Even though he went to rival schools, he was just good people. I wish I honestly, in high school I would've hung out with him a little bit more. Like he was just that good of a friend to me, like I said, he didn't have to do what he did you know? And I totally commend him for that.

Host: Did he have concerns about vaccination, do you think?

Benji: I think he wanted to get vaccinated, but I don't think he had enough information on that subject to get vaccinated. Because a lot of people didn't really even believe COVID was real for a long time, they always heard, oh COVID, COVID, COVID. And then they would see people say they have COVID, and they'll get through it but what people don't understand when you on dialysis or you just got a kidney transplant or any kind of transplant, your immune system is already weaker. So, for him to be out without a mask and he didn't have any COVID shots, it attached to him easy. His immune system was already down.

Host: Even at the stage when you're on dialysis, your immune system is still less. It's suppressed compared to if you're not on dialysis. So, you're already a little bit vulnerable to an infection. And then after you've had a transplant, then you've got a different level of vulnerability because you're on the immunosuppressant drugs. So, both those stages are higher risk. I'm just so sorry you lost your good friend.

Benji: Yeah, I'm still right now like I'm in disbelief, because if anybody know Chris, Chris is like 6'8", like at least 240, 250. He's a big dude. I'm like 6'2½", 6'3",

6'4" on a good day and he towered over me, and just the way COVID went through his body, that's baffling to me.

Host: Isn't it amazing, because you can be a big guy and you can look almost invincible physically, but then this tiny little virus can just do so much damage?

Benji: Yeah. That that virus ain't no joke, honestly, I think it's probably one of the worst viruses we ever had.

Host: It's hard getting over people you love, when you lose people, you love.

Benji: Yeah. You're right about that. You definitely can't turn back the clock.

Host: So, if you were to share kind of some of the most important things that you've learned during these years, because ultimately, you've, personally, you've had a great outcome and you got, with Dr. Veale, you got a great success with your transplant and I'm sure you're doing everything you need to do. What are some of the most important things that you learned during that journey?

Benji: I think the most important thing that I learned during this whole journey, these whole 20 years is never give up on yourself, because it was a lot of times where I just didn't want to do it no more. You know, I really didn't want to be here no more. I'm not going to say I wanted to commit suicide or kill myself or nothing like that, but I was just tired. I was tired of going through the pain. I've been through over 50 surgeries. I've got scars everywhere. I beat cancer. I've had my kidneys removed. I've had blood infections, like I said, surgeries at the ying yang. But when I got into that rut and I didn't want to do it no more, I would miss dialysis days and I would feel terrible, but I think the biggest thing that changed my life was having my son, Bryce. That changed me. You know, having a kid changed me. He's seven now.

Host: Great age.

Benji: He's seven, now. Yep. And I had them when I was 34. I like to think that's my favorite number, like my lucky number, because that was my basketball number also. So, 34 was always a special number and that was when I had my kid. So special, special.

Host: And knew yourself. It sounds like you didn't need much persuasion to get vaccination.

Benji: Oh no, because right before the transplant, I went to see the doctors to get evaluated and I spoke with the physicians. I was like, is it a requirement for me to get the vaccines to get my transplant? And he said, yes and when he said yes, it was a no brainer. So, I got all three of them plus the boosters, all three of them, yeah.

Host: So, with COVID the challenge we have is how do we get that message over to people who are not in a situation where they're having a lot of discussions with a doctor or with a healthcare team?

Benji: Yeah. Some people just, like I said, they think COVID is not real, even now the mask protocol is back in effect, and I still see people walking around with no mask. I just shake my head like I'm like, I don't get it. I really don't get it, but to each his own, I guess.

Host: So now you've had your transplant. You're feeling good?

Benji: Great.

Host: You are feeling like 20 years younger?

Benji: Yeah, definitely. No more aching joints, no more dizziness, I got an appetite, I think I've already put on like 20 pounds. Went from the slim face with no color to a round face with color. So, it's just that blood circulation is there, for real. God is good, man.

Host: Fantastic. Really appreciate you sharing your story.

Benji: Yeah. I'm not really a stand-up speaker, you know, I don't like doing it. Like when I was in college, I took classes for it just in case I made it to the NBA, and I had to do interviews and stuff like that. I'm definitely not a speaker but if this will help somebody else in some way get through what they're going through then so be it.

Host: Absolutely. Well, we're looking forward to sharing your story and we're going to have Dr. Veale back on the podcast and we'll probably talk a little bit about you. I hope you don't mind.

Benji: That's all good, sounds good. Go for it.

Host: All right, Benji, thanks so much for joining us on kidney transplant conversations. It's been a real pleasure to hear your story.

Benji: All right. Thank you.

Host: Thanks for sharing your experiences with everyone.

Benji: No problem. Anytime. Anytime.

Host: All right. Take care now.

Benji: All right. You, too.



Host: This episode of Kidney Transplant Conversations is dedicated to the memory of Chris Osbourne.

We hope you are enjoying listening to the series. Please consider sharing the podcast with others and perhaps leaving us a positive review on whichever platform you listen.

We will be back soon with more Kidney Transplant Conversations, until then be safe, be well and take care.

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