

My husband, Jeffrey S. Perelka, was a pastor who loved life and loved people. He had the best laugh, and I loved him dearly. I never imagined that taking him to the hospital would be the last time he would ever leave our home.

On November 17, 2021, I took Jeff to Avita Hospital because his oxygen level was in the 60s. He was not complaining of shortness of breath and did not appear to be showing signs of hypoxia. I thought he might be admitted for a day or two so he could be monitored and treated. Instead, we were immediately told that he had double-lung COVID-19 pneumonia and needed to be placed on a ventilator. At that time, we refused.

Because no hospital beds were available, I was initially allowed to stay with Jeff while he remained in the emergency room. After two days, he was moved to a regular hospital room, and I was no longer permitted to stay because I had to isolate for ten days.

On November 22, I received a call from the hospital informing me that Jeff had been found on the floor of his room and had required resuscitation. When I arrived, I was told that I needed to convince him to be intubated.

Later, Jeff told me that he had wanted to shave. His oxygen was removed, and the nurse left the room. Without oxygen, Jeff lost consciousness and fell to the floor. This happened twice during his hospitalization. The second incident occurred while I was in the room. A nurse walked out without turning Jeff's oxygen back on. He suddenly went limp. I screamed for help, and respiratory therapists, doctors, and other staff rushed in. A respiratory therapist immediately yelled, "His oxygen is off!" His oxygen was quickly restored. That respiratory therapist was later reprimanded for saying it in front of us. After that, I refused to leave Jeff's room.

Jeff remained at Avita for approximately three months. He was repeatedly switched between BiPAP and high-flow oxygen. During therapy, his oxygen levels sometimes dropped into the 40s. We received conflicting information from therapy, respiratory, and medical staff, and we became increasingly concerned that we did not understand his care plan. We requested a meeting with the various departments so we could understand what was being done to help him. During that meeting, we felt that significant attention was placed on his lack of insurance. We were also repeatedly encouraged to have Jeff vaccinated, despite our concerns.

Eventually, we were given the opportunity to transfer Jeff to Cleveland Clinic. We were told that vaccination was necessary for him to have a chance at receiving a lung transplant. Desperate to save his life, Jeff agreed.

At Cleveland Clinic, Jeff was placed on ECMO to support his lungs and eventually his heart. He was placed on the transplant list and later required dialysis. After three dry runs for a lung transplant, Jeff developed an infection and was removed from the transplant list. We pleaded with the medical team to reconsider, but they refused, saying they did not believe he would recover from the infection.

Our family also tried to have Jeff transferred to a high-risk transplant center in Chicago. The center initially accepted him, but after speaking with staff at Cleveland Clinic, they ultimately declined him.

After 191 days in the hospital, Jeff died on May 27, 2022.