

## Profile: Vanda Vanover Kercher



*After suffering sinus, stomach, lung and urinary tract infections, as well as gastrointestinal issues, since childhood before finally being diagnosed with CVID at 60 years old, Vanda wishes she had pushed harder for an earlier diagnosis and encourages others to do so.*

**AS A CHILD,** Vanda Vanover Kercher was often sick, frequently missing school. Later as an adult, her poor health caused her to miss work and social functions. Thankfully, Vanda's recent diagnosis of common variable immune deficiency (CVID) has finally given her answers to questions that years of doctor visits could not seem to provide. Today, this resilient 60-year-old is optimistic that her new infusion regimen will begin to restore her energy and quality of life.

**Trudie:** What were your symptoms leading up to your diagnosis?

**Vanda:** Since childhood, I remember always being sick. I was sent home frequently from school with a cold, chronic cough and runny nose. Unfortunately, I was never taken

By Trudie Mitschang

to the doctor. I think my mom, a single parent of six and living on a very limited income, believed my symptoms were caused by allergies and did not warrant a trip to the doctor. As an adult, I was able to afford medical care; however, looking back, I was always at the doctor's office. I was prescribed course after course of antibiotics for what was believed to be sinus, stomach, lung and/or urinary tract infections. I recognized I was always sick. I accepted chronic sickness as the result of pushing my way through 12- to 14-hour workdays in a very stressful career. Allergies was another common self-diagnosis. I missed work frequently but my bosses, pleased with my work and my long-term employment, found ways to accommodate me.

**Trudie:** Tell us about your diagnostic journey.

**Vanda:** I was finally diagnosed in September 2023 at age 60. I was initially referred to an immunologist in 2020 by my primary care physician based on my blood work and history of chronic infection. At this point, I was unable to even control my bowels when I coughed or sneezed. The immunologist had my blood drawn and recognized I was severely vitamin D- and B12-deficient, and before he could help me, I would need a gastroenterologist. The gastroenterologist diagnosed me with pernicious anemia and autoimmune gastritis (AIG). The good news was that in the process, they found a hernia and surgically repaired it, correcting my inability to control my bowels. That

was a relief. Once my anemia and AIG were stabilized, I was referred to a new immunologist. I waited six weeks for his next available appointment only to learn on my first visit that he was leaving this practice for another one. Argh!! He drew my blood and referred me to another immunologist.

**Trudie:** What happened next?

**Vanda:** I was able to review my blood work online and could see that my IgA, IgG and IgM levels were extremely low, with a note that said "no surprises here." They suggested I get another pneumonia vaccine and another round of blood work in six weeks. I was frustrated with this response, especially since it was a surprise to me! I could tell this doctor was not vested in my health since he was leaving. Expecting another six-week delay, I immediately made an appointment with a new immunologist.

**Trudie:** How did you learn it was CVID?

**Vanda:** While I was waiting to see the new doctor, I began researching what my blood results meant, associated diseases and why I needed another pneumonia vaccine. I learned the purpose of the titer blood test and, in the process, I found out about CVID and if that is what I have, everything lined up. When the titer blood test showed I was still not protected from pneumonia even after two vaccines, it confirmed this diagnosis.

**Trudie:** Did you click with your new doctor?

**Vanda:** My new immunologist is wonderful! Within a week of diagnosis, nurses were being lined up to begin

the subcutaneous immune globulin (SCIG) infusions. The diagnosis process was long and frustrating for me and, at times, very discouraging. I had self-doubt about my own symptoms. Autoimmune and immunodeficiency are diseases that, unless you have them, you can't understand. I have had two infusions so far. My fingers are crossed that I will at least be able to build up my immune system to be around family and friends or attend a special occasion. I am truly grateful for those who donate their plasma; there are many people who are dependent on their time and commitment.

**Trudie:** What is your treatment plan?

**Vanda:** I will use inhalers, take an every-other-day antibiotic and have a weekly SCIG infusion for the rest of my life. I also take a handful of other medications throughout the day and evening.

**Trudie:** How has living with chronic illness impacted your personal life and career?

**Vanda:** I can no longer sustain my 42-year career of leading people and building teams because any exposure to sickness could land me (and has landed me) in the emergency room with pneumonia. My autoimmune gastritis, besides digestive concerns, prevents me from absorbing vitamins B12 and D, causing me to struggle with fatigue, weakness and anemia. On top of that, Hashimoto's disease taps into my energy level. I have become a prisoner in my own home. I have had the opportunity to take some amazing vacations but would always become sick while traveling or paid the price when I got home. I just can't take those chances anymore. Every time I hear about someone's travels,

they end up with COVID. I have been unable to attend family events, parties, anything that involves a crowd. My social interactions have depended on friends coming to visit me at my house and, I can tell you, those visits really mean a lot to me.

**Trudie:** Are you part of any support groups?

**Vanda:** I recently joined two CVID Facebook groups. I did this so I can learn about CVID from others. From reading their comments, I feel I have found "my people." It's encouraging to interact with others who have health challenges similar to mine.

**Trudie:** How is your health today?

**Vanda:** I like to think of myself as healthy but, in reality, I am not. I must accept the cards I have been dealt. Sometimes life has a way of slowing you down, and I am learning to listen to what my body is telling me. I have been humbled just learning to depend on or even accept help from others. Perhaps my life is just being redirected. I am hoping the SCIG will build my immune system strong enough to at least allow me to interact socially again with family and friends, maybe attend church, watch my nephew's football game — the normal things in life.

**Trudie:** What has this experience taught you about yourself?

**Vanda:** I realize that I was overly hard on myself when I would miss work or let someone down because I was sick. I pushed through the fog of being constantly sick and weak because I knew people were counting on me. I should have realized that how I was feeling was not normal, put myself first and pushed my doctors for more answers instead of just accepting another antibiotic.

**Trudie:** How important is it to be your own healthcare advocate?

**Vanda:** It is critical that you be an advocate for yourself instead of just accepting another round of antibiotics. I wish I would have pushed my doctors for better answers to my chronic health problems. I could have been diagnosed much sooner.


**Trudie:** How do you maintain a positive outlook?

**Vanda:** I try to be as independent as I can because this helps me feel better about myself. I like to find the strengths in myself and focus on those.

**Trudie:** What do you wish family and friends understood about your condition?

**Vanda:** I don't want them to be afraid to come see me because they are afraid they may get me sick. I spend much of my time in isolation and enjoy a planned visit provided they are not sick themselves. I am hoping that with a few months of the SCIG infusions, I will have a strong enough immune system and will be able to go see them. I want my friends and family to know I appreciate them, especially those who have checked up on me.

**Trudie:** What advice do you have for others newly diagnosed or living with chronic illness?

**Vanda:** Stay as positive and optimistic as possible. Focus on the things you *can* do. Push yourself, but don't be *too* hard on yourself if you come up short. 



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