

SUPPORT IS KEY

Like many who are newly gluten-free, learning to live without it was a challenge.

Between trying to find gluten-free ingredients — and also how to cook with them — to educating his friends and family why he couldn't eat their food, the Klapp-erichs had huge hurdles to overcome.

"The saying in our family is, 'Is it Uncle Al friendly or not?'" Peg said, noting, "My family and his family have been very supportive."

Finding resources to make a gluten-free life a reality, though, meant plenty of research, as well as trial-and-error.

"We were lost," Al said. "We didn't know where to look in the store."

The toughest part may have been taking the journey largely on his own.

"When first diagnosed, you go through a lot of highs and lows," Al said. "Yea, there was some depression. I was sick of being sick all the time."

Discovering some message boards online offered at least someone with whom to talk.

Those people helped, but as Al and Peg explained, having face-to-face contact with others in the same situation is invaluable.

"We went to a place in Milwaukee," Peg said. "A place that caters right to [gluten-free]."

That was one lifesaver. An employee there not only helped find products, but spent an hour and a half explaining how to use them.

Before going there, Peg had struggled to cook for Al.

"The first cookies I made looked perfect, and then they disintegrated when I pulled them off the pan," she said. "Because I didn't know how to make it."

Gluten typically is what holds baked goods together. Replacing it successfully is difficult, but can be done.

But only when a person knows how.

CREATING A SUPPORT GROUP

And that's where Al's idea for creating a local support group for Celiacs came to mind.

"We've been thinking about this," Al said, noting the mission statement he has in mind for the group would be "Educate, motivate and advocate."

These are priorities because:

➤ **Educate:** "We first have to educate ourselves, then educate others about this," Al said. "When it comes to this condition, knowledge is health. It's a matter of knowing it and passing it on."

➤ **Motivate:** "We need to motivate and support one another," he said. "There are a lot of ups and downs ... You need a support group to tell you, 'You will get beyond this.'"

➤ **Advocate:** "In numbers there is strength," Al said. "In a group-type setting we can speak as one voice and make changes."

The group can be much more though, too.

He envisions it as somewhere Celiacs can trade recipes for gluten-free goodies, while maybe listening to speakers address key issues in a gluten-free world.

"Once I got this figured out ... I really felt I need to pay back what was done for me," Al said. "I felt I could help other people. I remember how scared, how alone we were."

How active the group is, however, will depend on those who join.

For more information on joining the gluten-free group, call Al and Peg at 748-4877, or e-mail al@gfnavigator.org.