Chain Reaction

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For many Americans, 2008 was a turbulent year. The housing market was in freefall. The global economy was sliding into recession. And the country was about to elect a new president. For flight attendant Susan Wilson, however, the turbulence experienced in 2008 wasn't just figurative in nature. On June 30 of that year, she was working in the aisle of a commercial airplane thousands of feet above the ground when the plane suddenly dropped, like a stomach on the downward slope of a rollercoaster.

"We hit clear-air turbulence, which doesn't show up on the radar in the cockpit," recalls Susan, of Red Bank, New Jersey. "I hit the ceiling and the armrest, then went back up again before falling on my back."

The injury caused Susan so much pain that it took a series of 22 epidural steroid injections in her spine to make it tolerable enough that she could return to work. Ultimately, Susan ended up in an operating room outside of the Hackensack Meridian *Health* network, where surgeons made a near-fatal mistake: While operating on Susan's back, doctors accidentally severed her left ureter, a short tube that runs along the spine, carrying urine from the kidney to the bladder.

"My stomach filled up with a gallon of urine," says Susan, who required four blood transfusions when her hemoglobin subsequently plummeted to 4 grams per deciliter, well below the normal female range of 12 to 15.5 grams. "I almost died."

With a damaged ureter, Susan could no longer empty her left kidney into her bladder. To keep her healthy, doctors installed a nephrostomy tube, a catheter that routed urine from her kidney into an external drainage bag. She lived with that for several months before going to another institution: Hackensack University Medical Center.

To restore normal urinary function, Hackensack urologist Michael Stifelman, M.D., had to find a solution for Susan's severed ureter. He proposed removing Susan's left kidney and re-implanting it on the right side of her body, where the truncated tube would be able to reach her bladder. He indicated that you could live with one kidney.

Susan had another idea. "You can live with one kidney? So I said, 'You know what? I'm just going to donate it,'" she says.

Susan's generosity sparked a chain reaction of altruistic proportions, and the story is a parable for the virtues of organ donation.

The Ultimate Gift

Ten years prior, Susan made the decision to donate her mother's organs when she died. When she subsequently met the man who received one of her mom's kidneys, the experience stayed with her. "He came to my house and was so happy," she recalls. "He told me that I affected 100 lives and that he'd pray for me forever. It was really nice. I felt so good doing it."

Michael J. Goldstein, M.D., FACS, Hackensack interim chief of organ transplantation, director of kidney and pancreas transplantation, and director of pediatric abdominal transplantation, hatched a plan to help multiple people with Susan's lone kidney, and she seized the opportunity.

"I told Susan, 'We can help more than one person by giving your kidney to someone who has a potential donor who's not compatible with them. In return for receiving your kidney, that person's donor can then give their kidney to someone else in need,'" Dr. Goldstein says. "We could save two people with one kidney. She loved that idea."

The recipient of Susan's kidney was Jung Park, of Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, who began having kidney problems as a child in Korea. The problems resurfaced briefly when she was in her 20s, then subsided until 2017, when she became ill as a result of late-stage kidney failure.

"My husband wanted to give me a kidney, but he couldn't because he has a different blood type," Jung says of her husband, Jin Park. "So we put me on the [waiting] list."

Because it utilizes organs from a full spectrum of living and deceased donors, Hackensack has the shortest wait time for a kidney transplant in the tri-state region. Nearly half its patients have received a transplant after 1.3 years, and 95 percent within 3.8 years. "That's about 50 percent faster than other transplant centers in New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania," Dr. Goldstein says. "If you come to Hackensack, statistically you're 2.5 times more likely to get a kidney transplant than at other transplant centers in the tri-state area." Hackensack also is the country's second fastest growing transplant center by volume. In 2018 alone, it performed 91 kidney transplants, up 50 percent from the year before.

Jung had to wait only six months because her husband gave her the ultimate gift: Although he couldn't donate a kidney to his wife, he promised to donate it to someone else in exchange for a kidney from a different, compatible donor. That donor was Susan.

"I was surprised she was giving her kidney to me, but I was so happy," Jung says of Susan. "She is a really generous and kind person, and that's why she did it."

She says the same of her husband. "He takes care of me," she says. "He has a very kind personality. He worries about me. That's why he wanted to give me his kidney. He gave me my life."

A Mother's Miracle

Together, Susan and Jin saved not only Jung's life, but also that of Bibi Uddin, a single mother from New York who received Jin's kidney. Prior to having her children, twin boys, she suffered from systemic lupus, an autoimmune disease in which the immune system attacks the skin, joints and organs.

"After having my boys, my lupus started to flare up and attack my kidneys," Bibi says. "It left me hospitalized because of kidney failure, so I ended up on dialysis."

That was in 2014. Four years later, Bibi was spending three hours a day doing dialysis, three days a week. In between sessions, she often was too exhausted to parent. "Just trying to figure out how to juggle my children and dialysis was a really big challenge," she says. "It was emotionally, physically and mentally draining. There were times when I questioned: Do I really still want to do this? But I kept pushing myself because I love my children and I wanted to be here for them. They're everything to me."

When she decided to seek a transplant, Bibi initially sought a kidney in her home state of New York but discovered the waiting period for a kidney there was 10 years. When a family friend referred her to Hackensack, she discovered that the wait for a kidney in New Jersey was significantly shorter. As long as she could find transportation to her appointments, the law allowed her to cross state lines and—hopefully—receive a lifesaving kidney in a fraction of the time.

In October 2018, less than three months after joining the waiting list for a transplant, Bibi received Jin's kidney on an operating table at Hackensack. Nearby, Susan and Jung recovered from their respective surgeries, which had taken place the day prior.

"Mr. Park donating his kidney saved my life," Bibi says. "I'm very thankful and appreciative of his kindness."

Healthy Ever After

Although some people prefer anonymity, both Jung and Bibi wanted to personally thank their donors. When Susan and Jin consented, each pair had a tearful meeting in the hospital.

"We cried," Jung recalls of her meeting with Susan. "I was so happy."

Months later, all four are not only happy but healthy. Although her back still bothers her, Susan says her heart is full after her experience with organ donation. Bibi, meanwhile, says her relationship with her boys is the best it has been. And the Parks? They're planning to host their newfound friends soon for a reunion.

"It's an amazing story," Dr. Goldstein says. "I've done nearly 2,000 transplants in my career and only once before have I seen this kind of chain reaction started by a donor with an injured kidney in need of help herself. It's extremely rare."

But it doesn't have to be, insists Bibi, who hopes their story will inspire more people to become organ donors. "If anyone is thinking about being a donor, I encourage them to become one," she says. "Because you never know whose life you're going to save or what that person is going through. A life-saving procedure like a transplant can have a powerful impact on a person. It changes everything."

Learn about becoming an organ donor.

Dr. Goldstein is board certified in general surgery with specialty fellowship training in abdominal organ transplantation. To make an appointment, call 855-424-WELL (9355).

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