WINDY CITY TIMES

FEATURES Views

How to donate a kidney to one of your newspaper's readers

by **Gretchen Rachel Hammond**
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Kidney donor Gretchen Rachel Hammond (left) and recipient Elvie Jordan. Photo by Gretchen Rachel Hammond

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Today I will be discharged from the Mayo Clinic in Rochester Minn. with one kidney less than when I arrived on May 20.

My left kidney now belongs to Elvie (L.V.) Jordan—a reader of the newspaper for which I have served as a staff writer for nearly three years.

At first I was reticent to write about it. As a journalist, I have been taught very well by my boss and professional role model Windy City Times Publisher Tracy Baim never to be a part of a story I am covering.

That said, according to the Living Kidney Donor Network, there are 93,000 people who need a kidney and who have been waiting for a chance at life for as long as five years.

This current and particularly ugly electoral cycle has been fueled by the politics of conceit. So it is easy to forget that, even if you don't have the resources of a wealthy philanthropist, it is more important than ever to help someone in need and, in so doing, change their world and, as a consequence of that action, the world as a whole for the better.

The account which follows from now until after the surgery this month is dedicated to that ideal.

I was frankly surprised at the number of people who asked me why I was donating as if I was offering to trade places with someone serving a life sentence at San Quentin or worse, give up my perfectly interesting and meaningful job to become a golf commentator.

"I might do it for a family member," they say. "But not for someone I have never met."

Maybe that's the problem.

How many of us pass by homeless people on the street who are asking for a few dollars to get something to eat? We keep out heads down and move on without ever looking them in the eye.

For many, if we think about them at all, weconclude one of two things: "I don't carry cash any more or I would" or worse "They probably make more than I do in a single day of panhandling. In fact I think I read an article in the Weekly Standard that said something like that"?

As a naturalized American, I am supposed to state with conviction that I live in the greatest country on earth. Having been born in the UK and looking at it from an outsider's perspective, I know that, for as many truly good people who populate it, the U.S. is also one of the most cynical places to live.

Ten minutes of listening to conservative talk radio and you could be forgiven for thinking that the “great Americans’ who are lauded on those programs tell people in need to get off their asses and help themselves rather than accepting them any kind of hand.

I have an unashamedly bleeding heart. But I’d rather it bleed than be made of granite.

Speaking of conservatives, I am also transgender.

The governor of North Carolina, the American Family Association, Alliance Defending Freedom, Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh, Michael Savage, Dennis Prager and so on would have you convinced I am part of a community of sub-human perverts who creep through the shadows of this country emerging only long enough to prey upon unsuspecting wives and daughters while they are reaching for a piece of toilet paper and so at their most vulnerable.

Even though there aren’t enough of us to fill Rhode Island, it seems we have become the enemies-of-freedom-du-jour.

I could try to tell you it is just not true; that we are as human as you with the same frailties, strengths and desire to solve life’s conundrum of happiness whether that is through love, a career or contributing to the world in a positive way.

But, much like the great big hole in the conservative argument about us, actions do speak louder than words.

My ex-wife once told me she was going to “change the world through music.” While I was always proud of her ambition to do something unique, I would address her impatience by saying “sometimes you can only change the world one person at a time but, trust me, the effect is cumulative.”

She didn’t buy that and her plans changed. She divorced me.

On Dec. 28, 2015 (over a year after my wife left me) I read an article in my paper written by a colleague: windycitytimes.com/lgbt/LV-Jordan-still-seeks-kidney-donor/53793.html.

“[Elvie] Jordan and her partner Challis Gibbs were among the first same-sex couples to marry legally in Illinois, due to Gibbs’ own health situation,” the story read. “Gibbs died a few weeks later, and soon after, Jordan became ill and now is in a search for a kidney donor.”

To my mind, that paragraph might as well have been highlighted in bright neon.

I had loved my wife down to every last shred of my humanity. I thought I was going to be with her for the rest of my life.

In fact, we had “forever and day” etched on the inside of our wedding rings. When she left it was out-of-the blue and I have never been so devastated.

It took me weeks to pick myself up from the puddle on the floor in which I was lying and begin to rebuild my life.

So something about Elvie’s story hit home with me.

While my wife didn’t die physically, the relationship did and it happened in a way that hit me like an oncoming train. Had I come down with kidney disease during my recovery, I don’t know, I probably would have just given up.

Elvie had not and, to my mind, I had to do something to help her.

Naturally I did a lot of research before I called the Mayo Clinic.

There are some detractors to this, even a website belonging to disenfranchised former donors, but you can live a healthy, long life having given a kidney.

Your health insurance company cannot legally drop you or refuse to cover you if anything should go wrong with your remaining organ.

Although I should point out that, while my company Humana cannot legally discriminate against me in providing transgender-related healthcare, they have found both a state and federal loophole which has allowed them to do so.

Therefore I made damned sure I got it in writing from them that they were not going to do the same if I donated a kidney.

I received that assurance and a bouquet of flowers from them wishing me well. They still won’t cover me for anything to do with being transgender. But at least they are taking responsibility if my remaining kidney

should fail.

However, they do enough testing at the Mayo Clinic's massive campus to make sure that the likelihood of that happening down the road is minimal.

I have joked that testing to be a kidney donor is like joining the space program and/or auditioning to be a character at Disneyland.

It is as rigorous as it is thorough and for good reason; they not only want to make sure you are a match, but will survive long past the date of your donation and eventually die of natural causes (like while attending a TED talk on statistical mathematics) rather than as a result of the donation.

Elvie and I's journey began when I called the Mayo Clinic's transplant center.

There were a lot of questions about my health and mental background. I had to release my medical records and assure them that no one had coerced, threatened, blackmailed or bribed me into wanting to donate. They even wanted to know if Tracy had offered me a promotion in exchange. The answer was of course no.

Two weeks later, I received a package through the mail containing a number of blood-sample tubes, instructions for a hospital lab receptionist on how to bill the blood draw to the Mayo Clinic and a convenient Fed Ex return box.

Starting the process was as simple as popping over to my hospital Swedish Covenant in Chicago and pointing out the Mayo's billing instructions, waiting while they argued among themselves, getting my blood drawn and running over to the nearest Fed Ex office asking them to ship a bio sample while doing my best not to look shifty about it.

I realized that, at any point in the process, something could go wrong that would eliminate me as a match.

So I did not contact Elvie until I found out from the Mayo that my blood work had come up as a potential match for her. I didn't want to raise her hopes.

After I was told I was a match, I asked Tracy for her number and texted her with a rather awkward introduction. "Hi my name's Gretchen and I want to donate my kidney to you."

She replied with a huge long line of heart Emojis. She was clearly grateful that I was trying but probably as uncertain as I was that this would go anywhere.

Besides, the next step was decidedly more complicated.

It meant a three-day trip to Rochester (about a five-hour drive north of Chicago) to engage in one of the most comprehensive physicals I have ever received. Travel, lodging and food during testing is not covered by the recipient's insurance and my journalist's salary did not leave room for vacations of any kind—even medical ones. There is help from organizations like the Kidney Foundation but I started a Go-Fund Me for the trip. I was shocked to discover that I had raised the money in under three days.

Always take conservative talk radio with a vat of salt. Like I said, most people in America want to help.

The April 11-13 schedule I received from the Mayo was daunting: A CT scan, Echo-cardiogram, an ultrasound, meetings with surgeons, social workers and a psychologist.

Even though the Mayo assured me that it was perfectly alright and that many people did, I didn't want to fail admittance as a potential donor

They also tell you that you can stop the process at any time and that they will not even tell the recipient it was because you decided it wasn't for you.

The only time I was tempted was when I misread the three-hour renal test they were going to give me as a three-hour rectal exam.

The Mayo Clinic is extraordinary. The campus is vast with multiple interconnected buildings. The town of Rochester itself looks as if it was constructed around the organization.

Testing involved walking from one building to the next, a lot of patience and an attempted appreciation for Muzak—which I think was an endurance exam in itself.

Yet everyone at the Mayo treats you with respect and the greatest kindness even if you are a member of the transgender community.

It seems they ignored the American Family Association's warnings that their female patients were all in peril by my being there. My donor advocate was particularly wonderful and the hour we spent together was like

having coffee with an old friend.

It was also quite fascinating to look at a 3D interactive image of my kidneys. The surgeon was thrilled that there is only one ventricle connecting each of the kidneys to my main artery that they have to cut through. I also think he said something about taking the left one.

I don't know. I was too busy staring, with wide-eyed fascination, at my own organs. That doesn't happen a lot unless you live in medieval England and you are getting hung, drawn and quartered—which of course does not allow one the time for an appreciation of nature.

After I returned to Chicago, the waiting began.

The surgeons, social workers, psychologists and my kidney advocate meet every Wednesday in a Mayo conference room to make a formal recommendation as to whether I am a suitable donor. I got the call one week after I returned.

They might as well have told me I has been accepted into NASA and was scheduled for the first manned trip to Mars/that I would be playing Goofy at Disneyland for 40-hours-per-week and dental was included.

I was overjoyed. Elvie was terrified. I don't think she expected it to go this far.

Surgery was scheduled on my birthday May 20. I thought that it was appropriate. "If we follow the axiom that it is better to give than to receive," I wrote on my Facebook page, "what better date on which to do it?"

Besides, I told my donor advocate that the Mayo could:

1) Give me cake-flavored anesthesia

2) Sing "Birthday" by the Beatles in the O.R.

3) Have a Mayo pass-the-hat for a set of false teeth so I can get my ground-down smile back.

I met with Elvie a couple of weeks before the surgery for coffee.

I thought it would be an awkward meeting but I found her to be as beautiful as she was genuine. We talked together for hours. I learned how devastated she was when she lost her partner, she showed me some of the

dresses she designs ad well as her remarkable work with hair extensions. All of that work is outside of her activism for the community which she told me she wanted to continue.

I arrived in Rochester with a dear friend and caregiver (asked by the Mayo to come along to keep an eye on my health after I left the hospital) Miriam Churchill on May 18.

There were more blood and urine tests to complete and I met with the surgeons and my donor advocate to discuss the procedure and what to expect afterwards.

They made the laparoscopic procedure sound as simple as getting a wisdom tooth removed.

Elvie and I arrived at the Methodist building of the Mayo campus on the morning of the 20th. We met briefly in a pre-op waiting room and hugged for the last time. For the first time, I shared her nervousness.

The doctors had told me there was a chance the kidney would be rejected and stressed that I was not to take that personally.

We were then taken to our separate preparation stations each with our own set of hopes. I kept looking in the direction of my left kidney. “Represent,” I ordered it.

I was wheeled into the O.R. to the sounds of the Beatles “Birthday” playing from one of the computers. Whatever remaining fears I had vanished.

I was told the procedure was that my surgery team would start the procedure with me first. Once the cameras they inserted into my abdomen determined there were no impediments to removing the kidney, then the signal would be given for Elvie to receive anesthesia.

By the time they placed an oxygen mask over me and told me they were “giving me the good stuff.” John Lennon’s “Imagine” was playing.

I awoke in recovery long enough to croak “is Elvie OK? Did it work?” before falling back asleep.

I have urged people to resist calling me a hero.

To my mind it is a title that is reserved for soldiers, firefighters and people like Elvie who have battled a devastating illness and are still standing, determined to fight on.

I am was just there to lend a helping hand. My remaining kidney is functioning well. Outside of some residual pain from the incisions, I am eating normally and looking forward to getting back to life with the knowledge that a person who was once just a story in a newspaper but is now family can get on with hers.

That’s how easy it is to change the world one person at a time, and you know the strangest thing is that it changes your life in ways that are just as significant.

To become a Living Donor, visit: www.americantransplantfoundation.org/about-transplant/living-donation/becoming-a-living-donor.

Or donatelife.net/living-donation.
