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The Power of Giving the Ultimate Gift

By Allan Chernoff

Ed Gumbrecht wasn't trying to be a hero. He just wanted to help an old friend who was in serious trouble. But in the ultimate turn of good karma, the Madison, Connecticut resident ended up saving his own life as he tried to rescue his buddy.

The incredible series of events began in 2021 when Ed learned that his childhood friend, Richard Hall—my cousin—was suffering from kidney failure and dependent upon dialysis. “Rick,” said Ed, “I want to give you one of my kidneys.” Highly appreciative, Richard declined the offer, saying he was on the organ waiting list and was hopeful that his name would soon be called.

“I have this feeling in my gut that I’m supposed to do this for you. I know we’re a match,” Ed insisted. “Just let me get tested to make sure.”

Every test pointed towards a perfect match: blood type, tissue type, and a blood serum antibody crossmatch that indicated Richard’s body would accept one of Ed’s kidneys. Still waiting for an organ, Richard relented, deciding to accept his friend’s generous offer.

To ensure he was fit to donate an organ, Ed needed one final test, a computed tomography (CT) scan of the heart. The result was a shock. Ed’s left anterior descending artery—the largest in the heart—was 98% blocked. He was on the verge of having a massive “widow-maker” heart attack. A surgeon at Yale New Haven Hospital promptly implanted stents to open the artery, preventing a heart attack that almost certainly would have killed him.

Convinced Richard had saved his brother’s life, Pete Gumbrecht was determined that Richard still receive a kidney. Pete got tested, and, like his brother, was a perfect match for Richard.

The transplant took place two years ago. Today, all three men are living healthy lives. They are each other’s angels, brought together in a beautiful life-affirming triangle through the power of organ donation. What’s more, the experience of donating an organ was transformational for Pete. “I always wondered if I could be that guy who could save someone’s life,” Pete says. “And now I know I am.”

The Gumbrecht siblings’ generosity is inspirational. Yet we are all capable of the same selfless acts of compassion and kindness.

More than [100,000 people are on the nationwide waiting list](#) for an organ transplant. Thousands of them, on average [17 a day](#), die without having had the opportunity to be rescued. While many generous Americans, like Pete and Ed, have stepped forward to donate, the nation desperately needs more people to become organ donor heroes, either by volunteering to donate a kidney during life, or by signing up to become an organ donor upon passing when it is possible to [save as many as eight lives](#) through the donation of multiple organs.

Living donors who give one of their kidneys are able to [return to work as soon as 2-3 weeks after surgery](#), depending upon their job, and [resume most physical activity within 4-6 weeks](#). Their remaining kidney will grow in size as it does the work of two kidneys, and there is [no impact on life expectancy](#) after the surgery. Best of all, organ transplants today are highly successful, especially for the transplant of kidneys, the organ for which there is the greatest demand. Advances in understanding the body's immune system and in the use of immunosuppressant medicines have boosted the [success rate to 95 percent](#) for kidney transplants from deceased donors and [more than 98 percent](#) for kidney transplants from living donors.

There is no higher deed in this world, no greater act than saving the life of another human being. In Richard's words, "The good karma, the blessings that will come back to organ donors will be tenfold. The knowledge that they literally saved another person's life will enrich their lives in ways they can't even fathom."

Now that the season of giving material gifts has turned to the season of resolutions, please resolve and [register to become an organ donor](#) so that you too may one day have the opportunity to give the ultimate gift, the gift of life.

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