How Christina Saved 11 Lives

by Marina Khidekel

When one brave young woman gave a total stranger a second chance at life, her generous act had more profound consequences than she’d ever imagined. What act of kindness—big or small—will this story inspire you to do?

Photograph by Jason Schmidt
Dispersely Seeking Donors

According to the National Kidney Foundation, about 20,000 people in the United States are on a waiting list for a kidney—and about 4,500 of them die every year, says the United Network for Organ Sharing. Of the 15,000-plus transplants that take place each year, roughly 10,000 use kidneys from deceased donors. The rest come from the living, related donors. It’s no secret in the medical community that doctors prefer using live-donor kidneys, which can last twice as long—up to 4 years—as cadaver organs. But for most kidney patients, lining up a live donor is beyond difficult. An organ transplant works only if the donor and recipient have compatible blood types and antibodies. Surprisingly, close relatives—the people most likely to offer an organ—are not always sound matches. That leaves thousands of patients in a frustrating, life-threatening dilemma. Those willing to save them are helpless to do so. In the past, patients were doomed to wait possibly years for a cadaver donor—or for the rare Good Samaritan like Do. (Around 100 such donors step forward each year.)

Incredibly, Do’s selfless act set off a series of transplants that would become the longest kidney chain started by a woman, and the second longest ever, as of press time. Here’s how a chain works: Someone who needs a kidney is matched with a stranger willing to donate one. To get the kidney, the patient must find a friend or relative who’s willing to donate one to someone else. Chains can easily break; one person may get sick before surgery, for example, or a donor may pull out. The chain started by Do ultimately spanned 22 people—11 donors and 11 recipients—and four New York-area hospitals over seven months. (See “Her Life-Saving Chain,” below.)

Some experts say they could create virtually endless chains of well-matched donors and recipients, alleviating the growing waiting list for kidneys—if only enough potential donors and recipients would join the pool. “In 10 years, it will be rare for liv- ing donor kidney transplants to take place outside of donor chains,” predicts Garet Hill, founder of the National Kidney Registry (NKR), a nonprofit organization that has facilitated 13 kidney chains so far. (NKR expects to arrange at least 200 kidney transplant chains in 2006.) Says Sanjay Kapur, M.D., chief of transplant surgery at New York Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Transplant Center, “Donor chains have not only revolutionized the way kidney transplants are done, but also have the potential to solve the kidney shortage crisis in the United States if applied on a national scale.”

That all depends, of course, on heroes like Christina Do who selflessly volunteer to help their friends the first critical link in the chain.

A Radical Act of Kindness

WHY WOULD A HEALTHY, HAPPY young woman give an organ to a stranger? For Do, it started with a serious article about the desperate agony of kidney patients.

For most patients, kidney failure is the result of diabetes or an inherited kidney disease. To survive, they require dialysis—a grueling procedure that involves being attached to a machine that cleans their blood, then flows it back into the body—usually three times a week, four hours at a time, for the rest of their lives. “For most people, being on dialysis is absolute mis- ery,” says Dr. Kapur. Their only hope is a kidney transplant.

Christina Do never forgot reading about such suffering. “I’m lucky that I’m healthy,” she says. “It was so awful to know these people were struggling.” Perhaps ironically, the recession also helped motivate her. Do’s field had been hit hard. “So many people were upset about losing money,” she says, “but what I got out of it was, there are more important things than money. It made me think about what kind of person I really wanted to be. And I decided that I wanted to really help someone. Donating a kidney wouldn’t really change my life, but it could save someone else’s. I couldn’t think of a good reason not to do it.”

From researching the topic online, Do learned that the health risks of giving a kidney are, for healthy people like her, surprisingly low. The chance of complications from kidney removal surgery is only about 2 percent, experts say; in fact, research shows that kidney donors even tend to outlive the average person.

Dating but unattached, Do also consid- ered how donating might affect her future, and any future family. “I did wonder, What if ever I had kids and someone needed a kidney?” she says. “But kidney failure doesn’t run in my family. I realized it was silly for me not to do this because of a bunch of what-if.”

That attitude is typical among Good Samaritan donors, experts say. “Most of us are compelled by a desire to do enorm- ous good and accomplish something greater than ourselves,” says Dr. Kapur. In August 2006, Do took the plunge, sign- ing up with NKR, which connects potential donors with transplant centers all over the U.S. After completing the required phys- ical and blood work, Do underwent psycho- logical screening. Doctors say this key step was crucial; they want donors who are truly emotion- ally ready to make such a major commit- ment. One red flag doctors look for, says Pat McDonald, living donor transplant chain coordinator at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx, New York, is unrealistic expecta- tions. “For example, a girl wanting to give a kidney to her boyfriend hoping that it will result in a proposal wouldn’t be approved,” says McDonald. “Neither would anyone hoping for a strong bond with their recipi- ent. If that bond develops, fine, but it’s not fair to either person if a donor has such hopes from the outset.”

After all, the last thing doctors want are donors who experience regret. “The rewards of donating are huge,” McDonald says. “It’s not often that you get to make a miracle happen for someone.”

Once Do was approved as a potential donor, NKR kidney chain mastermind Hil immediately went to work, trying not only to match her with a patient who needed her kidney, but also to ease her as a learning- point for a chain. (The registry attempts to start chains with every Good Samaritan donor, Hil says.) After sifting through his extensive database of possible donors and recipients registered with transplant cen- ters all over the country, Hil found several suitable matches in the New York area.

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During the weeks leading up to her opera- tion, Hil coordinated with patients and doctors to arrange for four surgeries to take place on one day in December 2006, begin- ning with Do’s. That cold winter day, Do woke up in the transplant center recovery room, grinning. (Continued on page 230)
realizing she had accomplished what she’d set out to do. Later, as Do was recovering in her room, four surgical residents she recognized from the operating room came by. “All I could think was that all these people had seen me naked!” she says, laughing.

Neither Do nor the patient who received her kidney wanted to learn the identity of the other. “I didn’t want the person to feel any obligation toward me,” Do says. “I did this with no strings attached.” When the hospital called to let Do know her recipient was recovering well after a successful transplant, “that’s all I wanted to know,” she says. “And it was all worth it.”

What Do didn’t realize was that the benefits of her donation would continue for months through the record-breaking chain of transplants. Doctors had kept her in the dark, partly to protect the other patients’ privacy, and partly because they had no idea the chain would grow as long as it did. Only when Glamour reported this story and told Do about the chain did she learn the full scope of her actions.

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**Total Strangers, Forever Linked**

**Do’s transplant chain brought together a cast of characters worthy of an ensemble film:** a New Jersey bass guitarist whose band opened a rock festival for Mötley Crüe; a hipster psychotherapist from Brooklyn; a volunteer nurse for Opera Smile; a globe-trotting Manhattan ad executive; and a Brooklyn hip-hop dancer, among others. The youngest recipient is a 20-year-old college student with a Facebook habit; the oldest is a 73-year-old retired teacher who has worked extensively with imprisoned teens.

Most of the chain’s 11 recipients have had at least one prior kidney transplant that had either been rejected by the body soon after surgery or had failed years later—common outcomes when a properly matched kidney from a relative is used out of desperation. Jesse Bilodeau, 30, had already endured three failed transplants before getting a kidney through Do’s chain. “I was almost out of hope,” he says.

Last November Glamour brought together 14 members of the chain—seven donors, seven recipients—in New York City (a few were unable to attend; others opted out for privacy reasons). As patients met their donors for the first time—and everyone met Christina Do—the scene was a blur of smiles, tears and thank-yous. Bilodeau greeted his donor, Rosa Fernandez, 55, with a long hug. She had donated her kidney so her husband could receive one from another donor in the chain. In exchange for Fernandez’s kidney, Bilodeau’s best friend, Mike O’Kelly, 28, who often drove his pal to dialysis, became a donor. During months of those dialysis trips, O’Kelly had asked Bilodeau’s mom what else he could do to help, “and she said the only thing that would help Jesse was a new kidney. I knew right then I would give mine,” O’Kelly says.

Bryan Harewood, a 21-year-old hip-hop dancer and choreographer, and the chain’s very last recipient, gave the group a short demonstration of his dancing skills, then teared up as he hugged his donor, Paul Michael, 35. “Thank you, man,” he said. “You don’t get second chances often, but you gave me mine.” The chain ended with Harewood because another pair had to pull out, likely due to illness.

As the participants gathered for a photo, Christina Do received a loud and long round of applause. “You are truly an angel,” said Norrie Oelkers, 62, who had donated a kidney so that her sister, who is a cancer survivor, could receive one. “You’ve given so many people their lives back.” Meeting the group made Do that much more proud and sure of her decision, she says. “Knowing even a little about the people I was able to help made the experience that much more moving.”

And Do’s commitment to helping others has only been strengthened: She’s now training for her first Ironman triathlon this summer in Switzerland to raise money for Team Hole in the Wall, a camp for kids with life-threatening conditions. “I didn’t do things like this when I had two kidneys!” she says with a laugh. And that, she says, is what she’d like others to learn from her experience. “People may think, ‘What kind of life would I have after donating a kidney? Would I be as healthy as I was before?’ I’m living proof that it doesn’t impact your health,” she says. “Actually, I’ve only changed for the better.” Knowing the good she has accomplished, she says, is an endorphin rush of its own. “It has shown me that one act can touch so many people.”