

Sojourn saves boy's life

Marysville man became an overnight celebrity in Israel

By Matt Moline

The Capital-Journal

MARYSVILLE -- Eric Swim returned to his hometown without fanfare Sunday, six weeks after making a pilgrimage to Israel to donate a kidney to a 10-year-old Jewish boy.

Swim's inauspicious return to Marysville stands in contrast to his arrival last month in Israel -- the part-time janitor at Community Memorial Healthcare Inc. in Marysville emerging as an overnight celebrity after making the decision this summer to donate one of his kidneys to a youngster he had never met.

"It's a humbling thing when a Holocaust survivor comes up to you and says 'you're a big hero,' or 'gibor' in Hebrew," Swim said Monday during an interview at his home, "when in reality all I did was donate a kidney. It's very humbling."



Ann Williamson/The Capital-Journal

Eric Swim, of Marysville, was featured in several Israeli newspapers after he donated a kidney to Moshiko Sharon. The 10-year-old had been waiting for a match on transplant lists for more than a year before his Sept. 21 surgery at a Tel Aviv-area hospital.

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The implant surgery was performed Sept. 21 at a Tel Aviv-area hospital, giving a new lease on life to Moshiko Sharon, who had been waiting for a compatible kidney donor for more than a year.

Swim, 38, says he learned of Moshiko's precarious situation in June, after discovering an Internet Web site operated by a New York group, Halachic Organ Donors Society.

"I can only imagine what Moshiko's parents were going through," Swim said. "And so Moshiko's story grabbed my heart. I began thinking that I have two good kidneys, and I didn't have to have one of them."

After tissue compatibility tests indicated an 80 percent match between donor and recipient, Swim was contacted by an HODS official on Sept. 3 and left for Tel Aviv on Sept. 6, accompanied by his wife, Lori, 34.

"I was doing my housekeeping work at the hospital when we got the call," Eric Swim said. "It was Labor Day weekend and the banks were shutting down, and they wanted us to leave for Israel on Labor Day. So we left, with four airline tickets we had bought at the last minute and \$60 in our pockets."

The couple's two children, Lucy, 10, and Josiah, 6, also went on the trip, which Lori Swim has described as a family "sojourn."

"So many bad things are going on these days that it is hard to look at the world and have any hope for children," she said. "If you want to have children see a better way, maybe saving one person's life will help us in the bigger scheme of things."

In the wake of the transplant surgery, Moshiko's health has made a dramatic turnaround because of the live implant, Eric Swim says.

"That's the benefit of the live donation -- the doctors know right away if it is working or not," he said. "With a cadaver donation the doctors may not know for weeks if the organ is going to start functioning."

By the time Swim was released from the hospital, the Kansan and his family had become the talk of Israel -- and the subject of numerous newspaper articles and TV features, according to Avi ben Mordechai, of Jerusalem.

Mordechai contacted The Capital-Journal by e-mail last week with news of the self-effacing Kansan's honored status in Israel.

"The whole country's news media jumped on this inspiring feature story of a non-Jew from a little town in north Kansas coming to show kindness to a little Jewish boy that Eric only met for the first time in mid-September," Mordechai wrote.

By the time Swim's sojourn neared its end, the Kansan's stature had risen to a level rivaling the media coverage given to Israel's popular prime minister, Mordechai reported.

"Literally overnight, Eric made front-page headlines next to Ariel Sharon," Mordechai wrote, "plus he was the talk of a lot of people, from the common man on the street, even getting a personal audience with Israel's President Moshe Katzav."

Raised as a Missouri Synod Lutheran, Swim says he and his wife began studying various aspects of Judaism several years ago and are considering converting at some point.

A 1984 graduate of Marysville High School, Swim received a bachelor's degree in English and political science from The University of Kansas in 1989, followed by a KU law degree in 1993.

Lori Swim graduated from KU with a bachelor's degree in education in 1993 and now home-schools the couple's children.

The couple taught at Emporia Christian School during the 1996-97 school year, and Eric Swim taught English the following year at Caney Valley High School.

In addition to his housekeeping duties at the 45-bed Marshall County hospital, where he has worked since returning to Marysville five years ago, Swim works part time as its compliance officer.

THE SOCIETY

Halachic Organ Donor Society mission statement: To offer card-carrying membership in a society that allows people to donate organs in accordance with their particular Halachic belief.

To donate: Contact Robert Berman at 111 8th Avenue, 11th floor, New York, N.Y., 10011-5201; (212) 213-5087.

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