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A Donor Match Over Small Talk and Coffee

By [WILLIAM YARDLEY](#)

TACOMA, Wash. — Annamarie Ausnes is known for holding up the line at her favorite Starbucks here, carefully counting out her coins to pay for her “short drip, double-cupped” daily jolt. Over the years, Sandie Andersen, a friendly barista behind the counter, might have rolled her eyes once or twice but she has also taken these morning moments to make conversation, to make friends.

Grandchildren? A favorite topic. That tan Ms. Ausnes brought in one day? A vacation souvenir. And then there was the small talk that day last fall.

“She reached over the counter and said, ‘I’m a blood match,’ ” Ms. Ausnes said last week, recalling the conversation.

Ms. Andersen said, “We both stood there and bawled.”

Turns out, Ms. Andersen had made Ms. Ausnes a special offer, off menu. On March 11, the two women are scheduled to go into surgery at Virginia Mason Medical Center in Seattle. If all goes well, when they come out Ms. Ausnes, 55, who has [polycystic kidney disease](#), will be the new owner of Ms. Andersen’s left kidney.

Ms. Andersen, 51, has worked at Starbucks for more than four years. She said she had taken the job for the good corporate health benefits, which her husband’s job does not provide. Her husband, Jeff, did not realize his wife would also be providing health benefits.

“My husband said, ‘Next time someone comes in and says they don’t feel good, don’t give away another body part,’ ” Ms. Andersen said.

Ms. Ausnes, an administrative assistant for student government at the University of Puget Sound, said she had been buying her morning coffee at this Starbucks, at North Proctor and 26th Streets, for three years. She has known for nearly two decades that she has a kidney disease, but her kidney function has declined significantly recently.

Last year, after tests showed that family members could not provide her with a transplant, it became clear that [dialysis](#) and a wait of some years for a donor were inevitable. Ms. Ausnes never mentioned this during her daily exchanges with Ms. Andersen.

“It looked like dialysis was coming close and I just said, ‘Annamarie, you never know where a donor’s going to come from,’ ” recalled Wanda Ryan, the transplant coordinator at Virginia Mason who is handling her case. “ ‘Keep telling people your story.’ ”

In November, not long after that conversation, Ms. Ausnes stopped into Starbucks as usual, but this time Ms. Andersen noticed that her customer was glum. Ms. Ausnes finally told her the news, and the response was instantaneous.

“I’m going to get tested,” Ms. Andersen said.

And she did. Blood type O? Yes, a match. Negative cross-match under the microscope? Yes, perfect. The six elusive DNA markers? One of six was alike, not ideal, but good enough.

So there they were that morning last fall, crying over the counter while the coffee line grew longer.

Both women expect to be in the hospital for about a week then to be out of work for up to six weeks. Howard D. Schultz, the chief executive of Starbucks, called both women and told Ms. Andersen “how proud I am to have someone like you working for our company.”

She joked about Mr. Schultz’s recent, well-publicized emphasis on having employees make a “human connection” with customers.

Ms. Andersen, who has done missionary work in Mexico and helped dig mud out of houses in New Orleans after [Hurricane Katrina](#), said this latest gesture should not be viewed as unusually magnanimous. People should give freely of themselves, she said, and they do more often than is noticed.

Ms. Ausnes will undergo regular monitoring and testing and will need to take medication regularly for the rest of her life to prevent her body from rejecting Ms. Andersen’s kidney, according to Ms. Ryan, of the hospital. Ms. Andersen, who was interviewed extensively by the hospital to make sure she was physically and mentally stable, should be recovered in six months, charged only with keeping a slightly sharper eye on her basic health and [diet](#).

Ms. Andersen said, “I asked my surgeon, ‘Will I be able to snowboard afterward?’ He said, ‘Do you snowboard now?’ I said, ‘No, but I’m hoping to.’ ”

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