

Local Jewish man seeks donor kidney



Written by Barbara Bayer, Editor

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David Seldner's kidneys are failing and he is searching for a person who is a match to donate a kidney.

As people prepared to attend Shabbat Services in the Park late last month when temperatures topped 90 degrees, some people wondered just how much they would sweat during the 60-minute service. Not David Seldner because he doesn't sweat and he doesn't get thirsty, due to the fact that his kidneys function at only 15 percent.

Seldner learned about 14 months ago that he needs a kidney transplant.

"Basically when your kidneys function at 20 percent or less, you are eligible to participate in a transplant program, if you qualify," Seldner explained.

Because of his low-functioning kidneys, Seldner takes a myriad of medications and is on an extremely restricted diet.

"I eat no dairy, no salt, no processed food and very low potassium. I eat no potatoes, no tomatoes, no citrus fruit. That means not only no fast food but virtually no prepared foods. I see two nutritionists each month and we have crafted a diet tailored to my kidney disease," he explained.

So far Seldner has been able to avoid dialysis.

"There are people with my kidney function who are on dialysis," Seldner said. "It's still a possibility, but it's very hard on your body and we are trying to avoid it."

"Virtually all nephrologists (kidney specialists) will tell a patient to do a transplant, preferably from a live donor, preferably before dialysis," he continued.

Brooke Connell of the Midwest Transplant network explained that a live kidney donor is preferred because research shows that short and long term survival rates are higher for transplants from living donors.

"But the main reason is that there simply aren't enough deceased donors to keep up with the need for kidney transplants in the United States. Additionally, receiving a living donation can shorten the time on the waiting list and also allows the recipient to plan for the transplant," Connell said.

Seldner, 58, is now hunting for a kidney donor. His wife, Jeanne, is not a match and he is the last surviving member of his immediate family.

Several friends have stepped up to be tested, but so far none are a match. So Seldner is telling his story, hoping others will be tested and a match will be found.

The diagnosis

At one time Seldner weighed 316 pounds. He lost a "substantial" amount of weight following gastric bypass surgery approximately seven years ago. The ensuing diet and exercise brought both his hypertension and diabetes under control.

But a blood test taken as part of a routine physical exam in April 2012 revealed that his kidneys were

functioning at a dangerously low level. Seldner's internist, Dr. Sharon Snavelly of the Statland Medical Group, recommended he promptly consult with a nephrologist.

"I did know that I had decreased kidney function," he said. "But I had not known it had dipped to this level until I spoke to my internist," said Seldner, who is "momentarily retired due to these health issues," but is eager to get back to work.

Seldner learned that the road ahead could mean he would be "tethered to dialysis equipment" or he could begin the evaluation process to see if he qualified for a transplant.

As with so many medical diagnoses these days, the process moves slowly. It took almost seven months before Seldner and his wife attended an orientation session at the University of Kansas Medical Center to learn about the transplant process.

Clogged arteries

The transplant qualification process involves a series of medical tests over several months that include a colonoscopy, dental check-up and a full cardiac workup. He was hit with another unpleasant surprise following the cardiac testing.

"A nuclear stress test revealed an irregularity. Then a diagnostic heart catheterization was ordered. When I woke up from the anesthesia, I learned that five of my arteries were blocked, two at 100 percent," he said.

Seldner had a quintuple coronary artery bypass graft on Feb. 4. He said his recovery was "steady and remarkable, followed by vigorous workouts at KU's cardiac rehabilitation program."

"I was so fortunate to be in the KU transplant program. Dr. Randall Ginton, my cardiologist, told me they were going to fix my heart. Wow! I was both terrified and ecstatic. Because I hadn't had a heart attack, the prognosis was excellent," Seldner explained.

Compared to how he felt prior to the heart surgery, Seldner said he's feeling pretty good now. He was placed on the kidney transplant list in March.

"Before my heart surgery I felt extremely worn down. Extremely depleted," he said. "When that got fixed, I felt better, but I can still feel sluggish," he said.

The search for a donor

Now that the heart surgery is behind him, the quest for a kidney has resumed. He is grateful to his friends who have already been tested.

"In essence they're like family with a generosity of spirit that is truly humbling," he said.

"Always fearful of doctors and hospitals," Seldner's personal experience has prompted him to change his driver's license and become registered as a potential organ donor.

Seldner, a member of The Temple, Congregation B'nai Jehudah, was out of town when Robby Berman, founder and director of the Halachic Donor Society, spoke at Kehilath Israel Synagogue earlier this year. But a letter to the editor in regard to Berman's visit, written by Marsha Schoenfeld, donor family services coordinator of the Midwest Transplant Network, spurred Seldner to get in touch with MTN and begin his donor search in earnest. He now wears a green Donate Life bracelet Schoenfeld gave him.

"The green bracelet is a symbol of organ donation awareness," MTN's Connell explained. "Many donor families wear them to honor their loved ones that have passed and recipients wear them to honor their donor hero. For those on the waiting list, wearing the green bracelet serves as a way to bring awareness to the public of the need and importance of joining the registry and being an organ donor."

Seldner said his wait for a kidney could be shorter than the national average because he lives in the Midwest. MTN's Connell said the average wait time in this region for kidneys is one to two years, but it could be longer based on blood type and other factors.

"Compared to the coasts, we have a shorter wait time because of population size. So our population on the waiting list compared to the number of donors we have allows us to have a shorter wait time than for example California, which has such a high population compared to the number of donors. Our region has some of the shortest wait times for other organs, such as the liver," she said.

Seldner said the testing process of a potential donor begins with a conversation in a hospital's transplant office. Once that first hurdle is cleared, the next step is to take a simple blood test.

As Seldner understands it, if a match is found through the blood test then further testing is done to confirm compatibility. If a donor is found he/she will donate one kidney.

"God gave us two kidneys but we only need one," Seldner said, explaining that the one working kidney in each person would work at 100 percent.

The whole process has been difficult and scary for Seldner, but he thanks his doctors and Rabbis Arthur Nemitoff and Alexandria Shuval-Weiner for their caring and support.

“This whole process has been a mixture of the spiritual and the medical ... I could not have gotten through this without the skills of people like Dr. Greg Muehlbach, my cardiothoracic surgeon, and his team of highly trained professionals who literally put breath back into me. The bond is extraordinary. KU has Kansas’s finest state-of-the-art heart care available and it’s right here in our city,” he said.

Anyone interested in being tested as a potential kidney donor for Seldner should email him at davidseldner@kc.rr.com or call him at 913-269-0774.

Organ donation stats

According to the latest statistics published by the Midwest Transplant Network, in 2011 there were 8,127 deceased organ donors and 6,017 living organ donors, resulting in 28,535 organ transplants.

Across the country nearly 120,000 men, women and children currently await lifesaving organ transplants.

An average of 18 people per day (or 6,570 per year) die due to a lack of available organs for transplant.

According to research, 98 percent of all adults have heard about organ donation, and 86 percent have heard of tissue donation. In addition, 90 percent of Americans say they support donation, but only 30 percent know the steps needed to become a donor.

For more information call 913-262-1668 or visit mwtn.org.

Organ donation and Jewish law

According to the Halachic Organ Donor Society, Jews have one of the lowest organ donation registration rates among ethnic groups throughout the world. The HOD Society was established to help save lives by increasing organ donations from Jews to the general population.

HOD Society supporters believe that Jewish law allows for organ donation. The website states “that pikuach nefesh, the commandment to save a life, overrides most other commandments. So even if there is priority to be buried whole, saving a life by organ donation is more important.”

The information provided by the HOD website is generally focused on deceased donors (not the live donor organ David Seldner is seeking). For information regarding HOD Society, or to sign up for a donor card from the HOD Society, visit www.hods.org. Local rabbis will also discuss specific situations regarding organ donation and Jewish law with their members.

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