

# An 'Angel' From Alabama

A Lubavitcher man desperately needed a kidney. A Pentecostalist woman answered the call, and ended up dancing at his only daughter's wedding in Crown Heights.



*Lifesaver: Marisa Hester, right, gave her kidney to Hershey Fillig. The successful transplant allowed the Crown Heights man to see his daughter Chani, left, marry Shmuly Rosenfeld, middle. Photos by Sharon Udasin*

by Sharon Udasin  
Staff Writer

For Marisa Hester, a Pentecostal Christian from Prattville, Ala., choosing an outfit for an ultra-Orthodox Crown Heights wedding wasn't easy. Sorting through her two sets of formalwear, she eventually opted for a knee-length floral skirt and a high-necked black chiffon blouse, embellished with sparkling beads.

She worried, however, that her slightly sheer sleeves were too revealing and would insult her newfound family.

But at the June 24 wedding, the bride and her relatives could not have been less offended.

A year ago, Hester, 26, gave an invaluable gift to the bride's father, Hershey Fellig, 47, whose struggle she had read about on an e-mail list-serve. With the slice of a scalpel, Hester gave Fellig — a perfect stranger — her kidney, thereby saving his life.

It took someone from Alabama who never met a Jew to come to my rescue,” Fellig said. “There are only a few people out there who do reach out.”

Fellig, a school administrator in Los Angeles, first learned that he would need a kidney transplant about five years ago. By mid-2005, his condition worsened, and physicians told Fellig he could only survive for another five years on dialysis. Meanwhile, his only child, Chani, was quickly approaching marriage age, and he wanted nothing more than to be there for her wedding.

“I have one daughter and she’s the pride of my life,” Fellig said.

Desperate, Fellig said he placed an ad on the Chabad.org Web site, asking if anyone would be willing to donate a kidney to him. Quickly, he received a response from Lauren Finkelstein, the founder of Save One Person, a New York-based organization whose purpose is to help those in need. Formerly a television publicist, Finkelstein decided that she wanted to save lives after she narrowly avoided a Jerusalem terror attack in 2001.

“I thought to myself, I’m not married, I don’t have any kids, I want to do something meaningful with my life,” said Finkelstein, the single mother of a 2-year-old. She immediately made it her mission to find solutions for those in critical need, finding organs and bone marrow for those who would otherwise die.

Joining forces with her long-time mentor, Rabbi Simon Jacobson, a Crown Heights author and lecturer, she established the nonprofit Save One Person in January of 2002 and hopes to eventually transform the volunteer-based organization into a fully staffed company. In one of Jacobson’s classes, she met entrepreneur Eric Targan, who decided to feature Save One Person notices in his Joke of the Day e-newsletter each Thursday.

Fortunately, Marisa Hester had been a Joke of the Day subscriber for several years, and as she was browsing her e-mails, a post about Fellig’s emergency situation touched her.

“Just seeing that someone was in need, I thought what would it hurt to have a blood test done?” Hester said. “It was all God — he orchestrated it.”

Hester and her family belong to the Church of God, a fundamentalist branch of Pentecostal Christianity that emphasizes personal connection with God through baptism with the Holy Spirit. Living in a predominantly Christian community, Hester had never met a Jew before Fellig, but she maintains that Christian and Jews believe in the same God who blessed her decision.

Fellig agreed, explaining that Christians, Muslims and Jews all worship the same God, and he has no qualms with Hester’s religious beliefs.

“She decided to have a higher calling,” he said.

Due to her relatively rare Rh-negative blood type, Hester knew that she would never be a match for her children, if either one of them ever needed a kidney. During her own pregnancies, her blood type caused her body to develop antibodies against even her own children when she was carrying them.

“I knew that something could eventually happen to my kids one day,” she said. “I did it for him, just as I would want somebody to do for me and my children.”

Her initial blood test revealed that she was a match for Fellig, but initially doctors found another donor, Hester said. Soon after, however, the doctors called her again to say they needed her, and Hester agreed to give her kidney to a man whom she had never met.

“I wanted him to be able to see his daughter get married and have children,” Hester said.

With no compensation beyond flying costs, her donor preparations began with a series of urine tests back home in Prattville, a city of 30,000 in central Alabama. In October 2006, she flew to

Los Angeles to endure eight hours of further testing at Cedar-Sinai Medical Center, where she remembers filling 23 vials with blood. Doctors maintained that she was an ideal candidate as long as she lost some weight, and after doing so, she flew again to Los Angeles in January 2007 to undergo more exams.

Six months later, Hester and her children arrived on the West Coast for the operation, scheduled for July 20. Reluctant to hide the truth from her children — now 4 and 9 — she explained to them exactly what was going to happen.

“They were worried that something would happen to Mommy,” Hester said. “Never in my life had I had a surgery before.”

Her 9-year-old daughter Hannah, though proud, was also afraid. “I felt kind of scared because I was afraid she was going to get hurt or something,” said Hannah, who also attended the wedding. “She did the right thing because saving someone’s life is the best thing you could do.”

According to both Hester and Fellig, the two surgeries went smoothly, with minimal side effects. Following the transplant — which occurred on a Friday — Fellig stayed in the hospital for a week, where he experienced some initial organ rejection. After the early problems, however, his body ultimately accepted the organ, and he made it home in time for the following Shabbat, he said.

Since the transplant, Hester and Fellig check on each other regularly, and Fellig said that he now has his best test results — he currently sees the doctor only once every three months. When Fellig’s daughter Chani announced her engagement, he immediately thought to bring Hester to the wedding.

“I’m extremely happy to have him alive, dancing at my wedding, and I’m looking forward to many more years with him,” Chani said, smiling.

After the ceremony, Hester and her daughter left the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s library and crossed Eastern Parkway to join the party at the Ohelei Torah ballroom. Clearly new members of the extended family, the Hesters joined hands with the other guests on the women’s side of the mechitza, bobbing to the live klezmer melodies. Hannah jumped in sync with the Lubavitch children, for whom such weddings were routine and whose feet had memorized the dances. A bit more hesitant than her outgoing daughter, Hester dropped in and out of the throbbing circles, but was never abandoned by her chasidic companions.

“They say that doctors are angels of healing,” Fellig said. “[The transplant] is a miraculous occurrence, and she was the angel of mercy for me.”

[Back to top](#)