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Riverdalian seeks kidney for transplant

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By N. Clark Judd

Susan Smelin, 54, director of the Riverdale Nursery School and Family Center and a Riverdale resident for 25 years, is in desperate search of a kidney.

Ever since she was 12 she knew she had polycystic kidney disease, a genetic illness she shares with both her siblings and which causes the kidneys to fill up with cysts, making them almost useless.

Last year, doctors at Columbia Presbyterian told her it had reached the critical point: end-stage renal disease. Her nephrologist recommended she make preparations for dialysis — a blood purifying technique used to compensate for the lack of a functioning kidney — no later than the beginning of July, she said. By then she will need to undergo a surgery to prepare her veins for dialysis.

Unless she finds a kidney transplant she will likely spend the rest of her life either going to a dialysis clinic three days a week or getting home dialysis more often.

During these sessions she will be hooked up to a machine that will purify her blood, but the treatment has side effects including infections, pain and fatigue. Not everyone reacts well to it, says Ms. Smelin, and not everyone even survives long enough to get a transplant.

It's estimated that it will take five to seven years — the wait time for her blood type in her New York catchment area — before her name comes up on the national waiting list, she said she was told. Though she is duplicating her efforts in other states, time is quickly running out before she has to start treatment.

"My kidney failure just nosedived," she said of the immediacy of her condition.

Now she is looking toward the neighborhood she has been active in for years for a donor.

"Dialysis ... it's not a good option for anyone," said Ms. Smelin. "Part of why I want to do this, frankly it's not just for my own donor but to raise awareness about this whole issue. People assume you can do dialysis ... but it breaks the body down."

"You live your life hooked to a machine three times a week," she said.

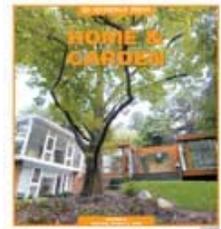
It stands to reason that her cause would be taken up enthusiastically in Riverdale. Ms. Smelin's ties to the neighborhood run deep. She founded and directs Riverdale Nursery School and Family Center, which serves young children including those with special needs. She co-directed Fieldston Outdoors Summer Camp for many years with her husband, David, who is a fourth grade teacher at Fieldston School in Riverdale and her daughter, Sara, was also educated at Fieldston.

About three weeks ago, her broad network of friends and family began a blitz of e-mails, flyers and phone calls in search of a donor for her. They reached out to friends and family to get out the word, asking people to post fliers in laundry rooms, schools and coffee shops. Joyce Pilsner, director of special projects at Riverdale Mental Health Association, plans to make a call for donors at an upcoming Community Board 8 meeting.

"I think it's honest to say [Riverdale is] where I placed the most hope for a donor because I am part of this community for many years," said Ms. Smelin.

Riverdale residents have stepped forward as donors before.

Rabbi Moshe Drelich, an assistant principal at Salanter Akiba Riverdale Academy, once donated a kidney to



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his brother, who moved from Los Angeles to Riverdale to receive it. Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg and his wife, Blu Greenberg, agreed to donate the organs of their son, J.J., after he died in a tragic accident in Israel in 2002.

Riverdale residents James Lapin and Dr. Judah Schorr received the Andrew Zucker Jewish Community Service Award for their organ donations last year. Mr. Lapin donated his kidney to a Lawrence, N.Y. woman through the Halachic Organ Donor Society in 2005. Dr. Schorr, an anesthesiologist, recently donated his bone marrow through the Gift of Live Bone Marrow Foundation.

Ms. Smelin has Type O blood, but she can be helped by donors with all blood types. If she is offered an incompatible kidney, it can be used in a "paired donation" that allows Ms. Smelin to use a kidney from somebody else's incompatible donor in exchange for the one donated to her.

To leave enough time for testing the kidney's compatibility before she starts dialysis, Ms. Smelin needs to get in touch with a potential donor immediately. But she said she would be grateful for a donor at any time.

Ideally, potential donors should be in general good health and between 18 and 60 years old.

For more information about donating to Ms. Smelin, e-mail kidneyforsusan@gmail.com.

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