

KIDNEY DONATION TO ACQUAINTANCE TURNED FOREVER FRIEND

It all started in Sunday School – October, 2005. Cheri humbly stood before our class, telling us of her husband Steve’s most recent doctor’s visit and the news that he would need a transplant soon. Steve has Fabry’s disease, a genetic disease that had just starting showing symptoms within the recent year or two. The disease had damaged both kidneys to the point where they only worked at around 19% capacity. The doctors said he could not live at this level. He needed a transplant, and preferably before he would have to start dialysis. This would give him a greater chance of accepting the kidney. He was put on the “waiting list” for a cadaveric kidney, but we all know how long a wait that can be. Plus, the doctors said a living kidney donation would also increase the chances that his body would accept and overall was the optimal situation. So, Cheri made a prayer request that a living kidney donor would be found. She told us what blood type he needed, and of what an interested potential donor would need to do to be evaluated. She gave out a phone number at UAB (University of Alabama at Birmingham) to call in the chance that anyone in class might be led to see if they were a match.

That was it. I knew then. I jotted down the number, and turned around to my doctor who happened to be sitting behind me and asked what my blood type was...of course he didn’t know. I knew he wouldn’t know. Why did I ask that? I think I just wanted to commit to pursuing this by speaking it out loud right away.

I did call my doctor’s office the next day and found out my blood is Type O – the universal type. So, I called the UAB donor evaluation office and spoke to Amy, a kind, warm voice who I came to appreciate throughout the entire process. I told her I wanted to be evaluated as a match for Steve. She began a series of questions over the phone, mostly regarding my health and my family’s health history. A few more questions like how did I know Steve, for how long, my reasons for wanting to donate, and the such. At the end of the phone interview, Amy told me I was able to proceed to the next round of testing, if I still wanted to. Throughout all the testing and evaluation, they always give you plenty of opportunities to “bow out” if you change your mind. They’ll even cover for you so your potential recipient won’t know you changed your mind – they’ll just say you were not compatible as a donor. Which is absolutely the truth – if you have real doubts about donating that linger and you feel pressured to donate, then you are not compatible. It can just be a hard thing if you had to tell your friend “Sorry, I chickened out. Hope you find another one.” They try to keep that from being an awkward situation. But I never worried about that. I knew I was the one. I knew I wanted to donate.

I told my husband and asked how he felt about me possibly donating a kidney. He said he was fine with it, if that’s what I wanted to do. I told my family what I was “up to” at Thanksgiving. I think they were all shocked (probably expecting my announcement to be about a pregnancy, not giving away a kidney.) I explained how I had always wanted to donate my organs, you know, after I died. I had signed my drivers’ license card to donate. But I never really thought about being able to donate while I was alive, since I’d never known anyone before that needed it. What if I could donate now to save

someone's life? How awesome is that? To know the recipient and see the good you've done by helping another person live. Why wait until I'm dead? I'd rather help while I'm alive (they can have what's left over after I die!) Maybe it's a little selfish, but it is the most gratifying thing I can think of. My family was curious about Steve, about the evaluation process, but I don't think they thought it really would ever happen. Over time, people would call Paul and express their concern for me, hoping he might talk me out of it. Of course he didn't. He knows I'm stubborn! People reacted in various ways. Some were WOWed! Most expressed what a wonderful thing they thought it was. Some wanted to know what if my family ever needed a kidney – then I wouldn't be able to donate to them. That question was the hardest to satisfy. I just said that I felt called to give Steve my kidney, and if God had called me to do that, then he would take care of my family and not rely on my kidney for someone else. I reassured them that the doctors would not let me donate if there was any sign or history of kidney problems in my family. My basic answer was easy – if the doctors say I have two good kidneys and am able to donate, and if Steve is dying for one good kidney, how could I not give it to him? It was a no-brainer to me. I understand everyone's concerns totally and appreciated their concern, but they would not change my mind. I prayed that God would make it clear through the donor evaluation process of his will. If it was not his will for me to donate, then I prayed God would not let me match, or for some reason be denied as a donor. That was the only thing that would stop me. But I knew I was called. I knew I would match. I knew I could donate to Steve. Eventually, most all my family saw my determination and felt my passion about it, and after giving them research I had done on transplants, they came around to feel better about it. I think it really helped my mom when she went with me to my UAB evaluation, and she learned a lot more and talked to the doctors. She, and the rest of my family, are very proud and supportive. It took a while for all of them to come around and feel comfortable with my decision, but eventually they did. They understood my conviction that right now is when Steve needs a kidney, now a few years down the road when he may get far enough up the list for a cadaveric kidney. My husband, Paul, has always understood from the beginning, and he's proud of me. He's never tried to change my mind, always supported me, always bragged about me to his friends and co-workers. He's my #1 supporter and I love him.

Next in the evaluation process was to send a lot of blood to them for testing match and cross-match to the recipient's blood. I went to my doctor's office and had the blood drawn, then went down to the local UPS store to mail it off. Now, that's something I've never done before – mail my blood. Try walking into your local post office and tell them you want to mail your blood to someone. It was kind of odd. UAB had sent me special packaging and shipping instructions, and off my blood went to Birmingham. The results were supposed to take 3 weeks to get back, but after just 1 week, Amy called me with the good news – I was a match! She said on a scale of 1-6, with 3 being a typical sibling score, I scored a 2. She said I was actually a pretty good match – about as good as you can get without being a sibling. I was excited! I called Steve and Cheri with the news, and they were glad and really tried to express their appreciation for me being tested.

The next step of the evaluation was an overnight stay in UAB hospital for testing of my own health, to see if I was healthy enough to withstand living with only one kidney, and

if so, to see which kidney is the best one to take. I scheduled this evaluation for 2 weeks later. However, Steve would be seeing his doctor again 3 weeks later, so he decided it may be better to hold off until after his appointment, in case things had improved with his kidneys. Steve and Cheri have such great faith in God, that everything would be OK. They prayed, as we all did, for Steve to be healed. No one wants a transplant. They knew Steve's kidney functions had fluctuated for a while, anywhere from 19% to 30%. The doctors said he could live at 30%. They hoped and prayed that he could maintain that using the treatments he was undergoing. After Steve's doctors appointment in November, we decided for me to go ahead with the evaluation, "just in case" he did have to have a transplant, at least I would either be ruled out or be ready to donate. I scheduled the evaluation for the week before Christmas. My saintly mother, as always, went with me and stayed by my side the entire time. She knows I hate needles. They obviously have to take a lot of blood, and they did. They did x-rays, an EKG, a CT Scan, and a renal scan to look at my kidneys. Nothing really bothered me except for the IV episode. It took 5 times before they got an IV in me to work for the CT test where they inject dye through the IV. After IV try #2, I started crying. It really hurt. But I quit crying fast when reminded by my sweet nurse how Steve must feel every week when he has to go through injections, IV's, bloodwork, and everything involved in evaluating and treating him. I was quickly humbled. This minor pain was nothing compared to his everyday life, and to think this was just the beginning for the pain for him if he didn't get a transplant. That gave me a boost to keep going, and after try #5 on the table of the CT scanner, the IV worked.

On the second day of the evaluation, the doctors came in and told me there could be a problem. In the pictures they took, they could not see the bottom part of one of my ureters. It just stopped in the pictures, they said. If it was deformed or something was indeed wrong with it, I would not be able to donate. I started crying. They thought I was upset that something could be wrong with me, but I said no – if I couldn't donate, how would Steve get his kidney? I was so convinced I was his donor. The doctors kept me an extra night, and performed a different test the next day. This time, the ureter showed up fine – something in the previous test had blocked the image. Before I was discharged, the doctors said all the tests seemed to indicate I would be a good donor, but they would not give the final word until after their entire team of doctors and specialists reviewed my entire file during their weekly meeting. Since it was the week before Christmas and they would all be off that week, I would have to wait 2 weeks for my results. That seemed like forever – I was so anxious to get the final OK to donate. Finally, they called to say that I had been accepted as a donor! I was so excited! I knew it – I just knew I'd be the donor! And, we were relieved to find out that the surgery could be done as a "hand-assisted laparoscopic" rather than the old cut in half routine. Shorter hospital stay and recovery, quicker return to work, overall less pain usually.

I called to give Steve and Cheri the news. Though they again expressed their appreciation for my willingness to donate, they really still held onto the hope that Steve would be healed and not have to undergo the transplant. Besides being major surgery, the transplant was risky in other ways. Since I was a good match but not perfect, there was the risk of rejection. Steve would have to take the anti-rejection drugs that can have

very uncomfortable side effects. But I guess I felt so sure that I was supposed to donate my kidney to Steve that I knew this was the way.

Steve and Cheri are two of the most Spirit-filled people I know. But I can't say I personally knew either of them extremely well. We had been in Sunday school class together for about 3 years. Cheri and I had been in several Ladies' bible study classes together over the past 3 years, and I had always admired her quiet, humble spirit. She was always encouraging, optimistic in the face of hard times, and most of all, ALWAYS led by the Spirit. That I could tell. Steve and Cheri have 4 beautiful children, the youngest just a baby. Cheri had dealt with her own health problems just a few years earlier, when she started having seizures during her third pregnancy. I didn't know Cheri when that started, so I don't know all the details. I think it had to do with the signals from her heart to her brain not always connecting. But I do remember seeing her drinking chicken broth at Bible Studies while we drank coffee (she needed the extra sodium for her condition, I believe). This in some way helped control her disorder. I remember seeing her limp at times when she walked – another symptom of her disorder. Our class prayed for her healing. The church held a healing ceremony for her. Steve and Cheri had such great faith that God would make her better. And He did! God healed her of her disorder. She's not had any trouble from that since then. When she became pregnant with their 4th child, we all worried that her disorder may reappear, since it had all started while she was pregnant before. But it didn't come back. I know God healed her so that she would be well to take care of Steve. They had no idea they would soon find out of Steve's disease and need for a transplant.

Steve had another doctor's appointment in January. By then, Steve and Cheri wanted to hear what the doctor's recommendation was. The doctor scheduled a kidney biopsy to compare to the last one done in November 2004. If the tests showed no change, they would continue on with the treatments Steve was currently undergoing. If the tests showed deterioration, they would schedule the transplant. Steve and Cheri said they finally felt at peace about the transplant. They felt some relief that the doctor was doing the biopsy, so they would know for sure, and not just basing their decision on how his kidney levels were at the time. This would help them have a firm basis for their decision. The biopsy was done, and the next week the results came in. It was not good. Steve's kidney levels were at the lowest they had ever been. A transplant was inevitable, the doctors said, and the sooner the better. Steve called me with the news. I asked him if he was OK. He said he was – that they were ready to do what had to be done. He needed a few weeks to get things in order, so we scheduled the surgery for February 20th. My schedule at work was such that I needed to be back by late March, so this timing would work out good for me. God knew that at any other time of the year, it would be a hardship with my work schedule to be out of work for surgery and recovery. But He had it all planned out. How about that – God's timing is always perfect. I've discovered that many times. Once again, it's true.

So, we waited until T-Day, transplant day. I was never nervous or scared at all. I just felt so sure that I was called to do this; I knew everything would be fine. I felt such tremendous gratification in knowing I am helping Steve to live. How awesome is that!

Our Sunday school class has been so overwhelmingly supporting and wonderful to us. They scheduled a prayer dinner to bring all our family together with the class, and our preacher, and have prayer over Steve and me. They planned meals for after the surgery, and they paid for the hotel rooms for my family to stay in while I was at UAB. This has been a great blessing to us indeed. I feel so much love and support from them. I'll always be grateful for that.

The prayer dinner was such an incredible experience. Most all of my family was able to come, as well as Steve's family, and lots of my class members. This was a special night because it was the first time my family (besides Paul) had met Steve or his family. They met and it was such a touching moment. While making all the introductions, somehow they overlooked introducing me to Steve's mom. I went up to her and said "Hi, I'm Christi." First she smiled as you would meeting anyone and said hello, then when she realized I was Steve's donor, she started hugging me tightly and crying and didn't really know what to say. It was a sweet moment. That night, the group let Steve and I speak about how all this came to be and to share out thoughts and feelings about it. Then everyone gathered around us and many laid hands on us and prayed powerful prayers for our surgery, our recovery, our families, for Steve's healing, but ultimately for God's will to be done. The night was full of tears, smiles, hugs, and plenty of expressions of love and of awe of God's grace and the miracle that was taking place. That's exactly how I felt – privileged that I got to be a part of a miracle – to be able to help save someone's life by letting God use me. I know that's true or I would not have had the extreme peace I felt over the entire process. We all felt it truly was a miracle – to have a living donor, a good match, sitting just a few seats away from Steve in Sunday School. What are the odds of that? But, our God can always beat any odds!

In pondering about the peace I have had the entire time, I realized how ironic it is, and how it testifies to the fact that God led me here, that I have never even given blood! I'm ashamed to say that I have not, but I've always been so scared of needles and just cringed at the thought of laying on a table for 15 or 30 minutes while they drain blood out of my arm. But that, too, is the gift of life. I've denied that to others who need it for so long. I knew after that realization that God had truly led me to this because through all the testing and eventually the surgery, I was never, ever scared or even gave it a second thought. So, now I have committed to myself that when I am able, I will give blood. I have type O blood, a very valuable asset since it is the universal type – they can give it to anyone who needs it! I can't keep it to myself now.

As our story spread around our church, our pastor wrote about us on the cover of the church bulletin for the Valentine's Day edition of the church bulletin. He wrote of how love is experienced through the love we receive from God through Jesus Christ, then from the love that we share with each other. He used our story to illustrate this love. Then the church newspaper wrote a very nice article about our experience, along with pictures of Steve and I during a prayer at the prayer dinner, and of us holding our special "kidney cakes" a classmate had made for the occasion! It's been quite amazing and admittedly exciting how the story gets around and really touches people. As Steve said

one day, he doesn't crave the attention, but he's happy to share the story in hopes that even one person will be saved by seeing how trusting and obeying our Lord can bring miracles into our lives. In addition, I have become very moved to learn more about, and to share with others information about living organ donations. Maybe someone will feel the call to help someone else, and by learning through my firsthand knowledge and insight into what it's like, perhaps someone will take that step to obey the call. I plan to continue as an advocate for living donations while praising God for the privilege to be a part of this miracle.

T-Day was approaching. My mom took me to Birmingham Saturday night to spend the night at the hotel next to the hospital, so we'd be fresh Sunday morning to check into the hospital at 9am. We arrived in admissions, did our paperwork, and greeting Steve and Cheri as they did the same. Then they wheeled us both to our rooms down the hall from one another on the transplant floor. We each settled into our rooms and began our pre-op tests. Mine included a lot of blood drawn, another EKG, and a lung x-ray. They brought the x-ray machine to my bed, but after developing the x-ray, they came back and told me I had "tall lungs" that didn't all get on the picture, so they took me to the x-ray lab for a standing x-ray. We had to laugh – I'd never been told I had tall lungs. The rest of the day was pretty much just waiting around in the room, with the occasional nurse coming in to take vital signs. My family started arriving that afternoon. It was so sweet to see everyone come up to see me. Even relatives from several hours away came. Monday morning, they woke me bright and early for surgery. My sweet Sunday School teacher and a church staff member drove to UAB in time to be in my room by 6:00am to have prayer for me before surgery! That was very touching. My family, as well as Steve and Cheri, came down to my room, in time to see me and join in the prayer before they wheeled me away to surgery. I was so excited! I raised my hands to cheer and had a picture made of me pointing excitedly to my kidney. It was finally here! I had never been put to sleep or been through any major surgery, so I didn't really know what to expect. They took me to a large room with people lined up in their beds, waiting for their surgery. Paul was able to come back there with me for a few minutes before I went off to the operating room. Once there, I don't remember much. I woke up around 2pm, after the surgery that lasted about 4 hours. They told me everything had gone well. But my eye hurt like heck! What? I went in for a kidney transplant and came out with a hurt eye? They used saline washes on it and wet cloths, but nothing helped. I had to just hold it closed to keep from hurting. Turns out I probably had scratched at the tape they removed after they taped my eyes shut during surgery. I don't remember much after that for a while either. I remember being back in my hospital bed, still holding and moaning about my eye hurting, while starting to realize my side and stomach were hurting too. I faintly remember a few of my friends who were there coming in to see me. I remember telling everyone not to make me laugh (it would hurt too much to laugh), and not to touch my side (as if anyone would – I just had to say it, I can't help it.) I asked about Steve and was told his surgery went well too. Later in the day the reports came in that the kidney was working already! Praise God! See, I knew I'd be the donor all along!

The next day, I still could hardly move in my bed, yet in through my door comes Steve and Cheri, who walked down to see me! I was so surprised to see him already walking so

well. I was so happy to see him! I was thrilled to know he was OK and things were looking good so far. Later that day, my in-laws brought my daughter to see me. That had been hard – being away from her. She'd call me numerous times each day crying that she wanted me. I think she had internally started to worry although we'd talked about the surgery all along. I had explained to her that God had given me two good kidneys, but mommy only needs one, and Mr. Steve's kidneys didn't work anymore, so the doctors were just going to take one of mine out and put it in Mr. Steve's tummy. I told her about the little camera they would put in mommy's tummy, and how the doctors would watch my insides on the TV in the hospital room where they took it out. She was excited about it with us, until just days before the surgery when she starting crying about it, mostly about me being gone. Maybe she had overheard conversations about people's worries? I don't know. Even now, after the surgery, she still wants to be with me every second. She doesn't want to go places and has been very weepy at school. I kept her home with me as much as I could, so she can feel safe and comfortable again that mommy's OK. She is my little angel. I don't want her to worry. But I haven't gotten as many kisses and hugs from her in a long time!

The next couple of days were mostly filled with repeated visits from the nurses for vitals, urine tests, and bloodwork, and the doctors visits to make sure I was progressing along okay. They sent an eye doctor to check out my eye - which turned out to be okay too. My surgeon told me that surgery went a little longer than expected (4 hours), and he said I have "tough tissues"...hmmmm.....tough tissues and tall lungs! Anyway, I was released from the hospital on Thursday. They wanted to let me go Wednesday (you know how insurance companies want to rush you out!) but I really didn't feel I was ready and my doctor agreed and let me stay another day. By Thursday I was able to walk a little more and was mentally ready to go home! Steve was doing great, his creatin levels were down to a normal range, and he was released Friday. He stayed in Birmingham another 3 weeks for blood tests before returning home. They say if the kidney rejects, it usually is in the first three months, so they will continue to monitor him. But again, God led us this far, opened every door, and I know Steve is going to be just fine! We have an exciting story to tell of God's grace and goodness, and what happens when you just "trust and obey"! Praise God! He is good!

P.S. - Momma always said you should go to Sunday School – I'm glad we did!☺