

For the Love of Jerry

By Ryan G. Van Cleave

It's the sort of thing you expect to encounter on *E.R.* or *Grey's Anatomy*, but Sandy Loevner found herself witnessing it firsthand in 2006 as her husband Jerry participated in the first-ever five-way kidney swap at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. This medical first required six different operating rooms, twelve surgeons, and eleven anesthesiologists, all working simultaneously to save lives and make medical history. Jerry's heart ultimately wasn't strong enough after being weakened by longtime dialysis, so he didn't survive. For some, that'd be the end of the story — a tragic tale ending in heartbreak, loss, and self-pity.

Not so for Sandy Loevner.

As a result of her experience of going through this with her husband, she decided to work on helping get a national donor kidney registry established to help get kidneys from live donors to sick people who desperately need them — like her husband did for so many years. Kidneys from a living person are far better than from a cadaver since they can last up to twice as long, though giving one involves true sacrifice. But this sacrifice is something that Sandy knows about firsthand — she gave one of her own healthy kidneys to a sixty-three-year-old Maryland woman, and in return, Jerry had a chance at life again thanks to the five-way shuffle to ensure the best matches. This is the same chance she wants to give to other people.

“For so many other diseases, they're looking hard for a cure. With this, we have a cure already. If people had enough awareness and knew that by donating a kidney or an organ that they could save a life, look how many we could help! There's over 78,000 people on a waiting list for a kidney right now,” Sandy says, her face animated by the passion she feels for this subject.



“If my husband had known about his options and had been better informed, he might be alive today. My mission is to do all I can to make sure other kidney disease patients don’t suffer that same fate.”

— SANDY LOEVNER

“I hope to get information to every dialysis center in the country as to how their patients can get on a national register,” she admits. The current situation is that patients who are told they need a new kidney simply go onto a regional list. That’s it. Not a national or international one.

Sandy finds this unacceptable. Instead of sitting back and whining about how things should be different, she got involved through her foundation and by helping create iCompassion, an organization dedicated to making good medical information about kidney disease available for the 26 million Americans who suffer from it. “People don’t have any idea that there are options,” Sandy says. “A kidney fails, a doctor says you’re going on dialysis, and people just go along with it.” She knows there’s a better option than dialysis and she’s determined to let others know, too.

And Sandy knows a thing or two about making things happen. For the past nineteen years, she’s been the volunteer executive director of the Florida Winefest & Auction, which has brought in millions for local and national children’s charities. “As a volunteer-based organization,” their website claims, “we work year-round offering support, inspiration and motivation for children to reach their fullest potential.” With a personal mission of helping others who are unable to help themselves, it’s no wonder that Sandy has given nearly two decades of her time to this organization, which only a few years back *USA Today* ranked as the country’s third largest charitable event.

Someone who understands all too well about needing some help is Venice resident Pam Doerner, who was told she required a new kidney four years and four months ago. “I’m not the same person I was back then,” she says. “Dialysis keeps you alive. I go three

times a week for three hours. Afterwards, I have to take a nap. Everything revolves around this disease. I basically get to live only four days a week.” When Pam started to worry that being on a list for a cadaver kidney wasn’t going to get a kidney soon enough, she considered putting an ad in the newspaper asking for an altruistic kidney donor. “What do you have to lose?” her doctor said.

She ran an ad in the newspaper and *three people responded*. If any of them prove to be a match, three months later, Pam will have her new kidney. Sandy’s working hard to help ensure this match occurs.

Donating a kidney isn’t as big of an undertaking as you might expect. “I was released forty-eight hours after the operation,” Sandy says of her own organ donation. “I moved into a new apartment that same afternoon and unloaded pots and pans, and I started driving then, too. Nothing really changed.”

For her ongoing work with charities, Sandy (and her late husband, Jerry) received the Schoenbaum Humanitarian Award from the Salvation Army in May 2007. With so many worried about themselves thanks to the sluggish economy and swine flu scare, it’s easy to see how people get lost in a Me-Me-Me attitude out of a sense of self-preservation. Yet witnessing the many good results from the Florida Winefest and iCompassion might just inspire people to choose to make a difference simply because they can. If you want to volunteer your time or money or even learn more about organ donation, visit floridawinefest.org or icompassion.org to see what options are available. Even a small bit of help might make all the difference for Pam Doerner or someone just like her.

Tell them Sandy sent you. 📍