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Retired teacher uses business cards to find kidney

Posted: Jul 17, 2014 10:13 PM CDT

Updated: Jul 17, 2014 10:13 PM CDT

By Connie Leonard - bio | email

LOUISVILLE, KY (WAVE) - A retired Jefferson County Public School teacher with chronic kidney failure got the gift of her life this year thanks to a live donor.

The donor wasn't a member of her family, or a friend. It was a stranger who answered her prayers.

Jackie Thomas taught English as a Second Language, or ESL, for decades to students from more than 35 countries. She also taught and lived in France for many years. She lived a happy healthy life until July of 2011, when terrible migraine headaches took a toll.

Thomas went to the hospital and had tests done.

"They said 'oh, you're in Stage 5 renal failure' and I said, 'there must be some mistake,'" she said. But it wasn't a mistake.

The next day Thomas began dialysis. "It's about four and a half to five hours each time," she said.

Thomas was to attend dialysis sessions three days a week, for the rest of her life.

"I thought 'wow, my life would be really different if I had a transplant,'" she said.

There were no matches in her family, so Thomas decided to check out the Living Kidney Donor Network. She said she found out with a live donor a kidney lasts twice as long. One other thing stuck with her, "You don't find the donor, the donor finds you," she said.

That inspired the former teacher to start writing last November.

"I've been on dialysis for two and a half years," she read from a business type card. She created the cards to hand out. On the back, was her kidney story from the heart.

"I wish to help my 4-year-old grandson grow up," she read.

Thomas's business cards drummed up a kidney lottery: Five offers for live donation and one more, from a woman she simply shared her story with.

"She said, 'I'll give you a kidney,'" Thomas recalled, "and I said, 'but I've only known you for five minutes.'"

That five minutes was all it took - the woman became her donor. A donor who only asked for one thing, to remain anonymous. The donor is not only kind and generous, she's intelligent Thomas said, doing a lot of research.

"Most people don't need to have more than one kidney," said Dr. Michael Hughes, a Transplantation Director in Louisville. Hughes said live kidney donation has little risk and plenty of reward.

"We have a lot of research studies showing that over 95 percent of donors never regret donating," he said.

Jackie got her new kidney April 8 at the Trager Transplant Center at Jewish Hospital. Thomas said of how quickly it all happened, "This is like a rocket flying to the moon, that fast because the normal waiting time for someone like me is three years."

She said, "I feel like I live, kind of in a state of gratitude because I know that because of my donor, my life will be longer and healthier."

Three months after the surgery both women are doing great. The gift has put Thomas into action to be an advocate for kidney transplants.

With that in mind, she asks the public to take part in the Kidney Walk that will take place on September 28 at 1 p.m. at Waterfront Park. Proceeds from the event will go to the National Kidney Foundation.

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