

“she gave me back my life”

Cheri and Debbie had a lot in common. But it took a near-fatal illness to discover they were a perfect match. **by Laura Schiff**

Cheri Vianello, 32, remembers December 18, 2002, as the day when she said to herself, I give up. Bedridden with a failing kidney, she desperately needed a transplant. (She'd been born with only one weak kidney.) Her husband, Paul, had been eliminated as a donor at the last minute and no other family members were compatible. “I was so sick,” she says. Then Debbie Bryant, 34, showed up on her doorstep.

A year earlier, Cheri was leading a busy life in Kings Park, New York, as a manager at a cell phone company and raising 3-year-old Julia. Kendall, now 5, was Julia's best friend at kindergarten and Debbie's daughter. “Debbie and I would say hi, but we barely knew each other,” says Cheri.

In December 2001, at Julia's birthday party, Debbie and Cheri had their first real conversation. That summer they enrolled their daughters in the same camp. Every day, Debbie drove Kendall to Julia's house to wait for the bus. Sometimes Debbie chatted with Cheri for a few minutes before heading off to her job as a marketing and sales executive for a mortgage lender. “Toward the end of the summer, Cheri wasn't feeling well,” Debbie recalls. “I assumed it was the flu.”

When Debbie bumped into Cheri that fall, she was shocked: Cheri's skin was yellow and she was having trouble walking. Cheri explained that her kidney was failing and hopefully Paul was going to be her donor. Debbie offhandedly mentioned getting tested. “I wasn't really thinking, Hey, I'll give you a kidney,” admits Debbie. “I wasn't sure what I was thinking. All I knew was that she needed help.”

“Could I be the one to save her?”

By the time Paul was eliminated as a candidate, Cheri could barely eat or even breathe. Her weight had plummeted to 89 pounds. “It was especially tough for Julia,” says Paul, a manager at a cable company. “She didn't understand why Mommy didn't want to play with her anymore.”

Debbie sometimes picked Julia up from school and gave her dinner and a bath, but she wanted to do more. “I'd always talked about making a difference,” says Debbie. “Then I'd get caught up in the day-to-day.” She researched kidney donation and learned that a healthy person can live a full life with one kidney. Finally, she broached the subject with her husband, Joe. “What if I could be the one person who could save Cheri's life?” she asked him. “Debbie is an exceptionally giving person,” Joe says. “So it didn't surprise me at all.”

Debbie called Cheri to tell her that she wanted to donate her kidney. After thanking her, Cheri suggested she talk to Joe some more. When Debbie called back a few days later, she told Cheri that her mind was made up.

Together the women drove to Hackensack University Medical Center in New Jersey for the critical first round of tests to determine Debbie's viability as a donor. The 24-hour wait for the results was agonizing. Knowing she couldn't handle another disappointment, Cheri convinced herself that the news would be bad. When Debbie came to her house the next day, Cheri was afraid to open the door. Finally, she let Debbie in. “We're doing it,” Debbie said, a huge grin on her face. “We're a match!”

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A healthy Cheri (above right) shares a laugh with Debbie; (left) the night before the operation with husbands Joe (far left) and Paul.



“The sister I’ve always wanted”

On Christmas Eve of 2002 Cheri started dialysis to rid her body of the toxins that had accumulated. At one point her doctors feared she’d die. Debbie called her every day. “I didn’t want her to ever think I was having a change of heart,” says Debbie. Finally, after six weeks of dialysis, Cheri had regained enough strength.

The surgeries took place on February 10, 2003. “Debbie got wheeled in first,” Cheri recalls. “I held her hand and said thank you. That’s all I could say.” The operations were four hours long and went without a hitch. Debbie was already walking around by the time Cheri came out of recovery. “That morning Cheri could barely bend the tops of her fingers. Now she could make a fist,” recalls Debbie. “I felt like I hung the moon.”

One night during their three-day hospital stay, Debbie woke up at 3 A.M. and went to check on Cheri, who was watching TV. They started talking about their lives—going through

in vitro fertilization, being the youngest siblings in families of otherwise all boys, their love for the outdoors and motherhood. By the time the sun rose, they’d decided that they could be twins separated at birth.

While Debbie helped save Cheri’s life, she credits Cheri with changing hers. “I no longer have to get everything done at this very moment,” says Debbie. “Now I’m like, it’ll be OK.” She also volunteers with organizations like the National Kidney Foundation to promote organ donor awareness.

For Cheri, life is much better than OK. Her new kidney is functioning perfectly, she’s regained half of the 40 pounds she lost and the trauma of the last year is finally over. “Julia is happier than I have ever seen her, just knowing that Mommy’s back,” says Cheri. “And Debbie is the sister I’ve always wanted combined with the friend I’d always wished I had. I couldn’t love her more than if we really were twins separated at birth.” **L**

Want to give the gift of life? To learn more about organ donation, contact the Coalition on Donation at 804-782-4920; or shareyourlife.org.