

Oregon letter carrier donates kidney to long-ago school classmate



Ray Hacker (l) and Marci McIntyre get together two days before their surgeries after both testing negative for COVID-19.

Ray Hacker joined Facebook a few years ago and got back in touch with many of the people he had grown up with.

A post in February 2020 by old friend Marci McIntyre jumped out at him. “She was in dire need of a kidney transplant,” the North Bend, OR Branch 2342 president said.

Though the two had not been close friends, they had been acquainted since the fourth grade. “She’s the nicest person in the world,” Hacker said. “She’d do anything for anyone [and] deserved to have somebody step up.”

McIntyre was born with a birth defect called reflux nephritis, a condition in which kidneys are damaged by the backward flow of urine. She received her first kidney transplant at 20 from her younger brother, but after 25 years—an exceptional track record for a donated kidney—it was starting to fail and she was in need of a new one. To find a donor, she turned to social media while continuing to undergo kidney dialysis.

“I was the perfect candidate,” Hacker said.

The Navy veteran was in good health and physically fit, and over his 26 years with the Postal Service, he had built up a collection of sick leave. It’s also in his nature—he had designated himself as an organ donor on his driver’s license as soon as he got it, and he says that he’s always given blood whenever he could.

There were some people and factors to consider before Hacker came forward. “First off, I talked to my wife, and she was 100 percent behind me,” he said. So was his mom.

When the carrier told McIntyre that he’d donate, “She was like, ‘No way,’” he said. Eight other people had said they’d do it, but none followed through.

“I knew that anybody who reached out to me was going to be a long shot,” McIntyre told local newspaper *The World*. “A lot of people have good intentions. Once they find out the logistics of it, and the recovery and everything you go through—you have to be committed. You have to be all-in.”

Hacker decided to put off telling others he cared about until he was confirmed as a donor; he didn’t want them to worry until he knew he was a viable candidate. Once he had undergone the appropriate tests and was sure about his status, he told his dad, his five children and a few others. He received full support from everyone.

“The risk did not outweigh the reward for me,” the carrier added.

He emphasized that potential donors need to be mentally, physically and financially able to donate. Although most people have two kidneys, the National Kidney Foundation says that people with just one kidney can live normal, healthy lives.

There are quite a few steps between offering to donate and actually going in for surgery. It’s “a lot of going to the lab and getting tested,” Hacker explained. There are blood tests, tissue type tests (which matches the number of antigens—toxins or other foreign substances that induce an immune response in the body, especially the production of antibodies—that the donor and recipient share), and tests for various diseases. There also are health requirements donors have to meet, as well as a psychological evaluation to make sure that donors know what to expect.

He and McIntyre each had a coordinator through whom they were supposed to communicate, as it makes it easier if something arises in the process, such as someone backing out or a medical situation occurring. But they contacted each other directly, too, since they already knew each other.

The COVID-19 pandemic added another layer of complications to the process. “COVID got in the way and they shut down the program,” delaying the spring procedure, Hacker said. The summer of 2020 was a lot of “hurry up and wait,” he said, adding, “I’m not good at waiting.”

The hospital involved, Oregon Health & Science University Hospital, gradually began scheduling procedures again, initially one transplant per month, then one per week. Hacker and McIntyre eventually got on the schedule for October. Because of the delay, they had to redo some tests that they had taken in April, because the test results are accurate only for a certain time frame. In addition, Hacker took three COVID-19 tests leading up to the procedure—two weeks before, two days before and then the day before the operation.

They both went in for the operation on the same day. Hacker’s began at 6:30 a.m. and lasted until noon. Surgeons make incisions above and below the belly button, and then get past the stomach and intestines and extract the kidney. “They pull it right [through] your belly button, basically,” he said.

McIntyre went in immediately after for an operation that lasted for six hours. After a short stay in the hospital, she returned home to recover further with help from her family.



The two friends check into the hospital (right) and prepare for their procedures (above) in October.

After a couple of days of recovery in the hospital’s donor loft, Hacker was discharged. He knew he could take advantage of the Postal Service’s program that allows up to 14 days of administrative leave to recover; he then used his sick leave to recuperate further at home afterward. “You’re sore for a while, especially in the abdomen area,” he said, and added, “I have to drink a lot of water now.”

He has some stitches and scars, but the worst part of his recovery was “my first sneeze,” he said. “Oh, my goodness, that hurt so bad.”

The carrier was grateful for the support from his postmaster and co-workers. “You worry about people being upset for having to fill in [for you],” he said, but “I couldn’t ask for a better group.” Recovery time generally ranges between four and six weeks; Hacker returned to work at about the five-week mark.

The carrier has a history of organ donation in his family—his wife’s niece has had kidney and liver transplants; his uncle has had a liver transplant; and his aunt, who had lupus and other medical issues, donated her body to a university for testing following her death.

Hacker says that organ donation has such a positive effect and adds





Hacker returns to work as a letter carrier following his recovery at home.

that he was glad to be able to help McIntyre. “If you can give a donation and keep them alive, you are affecting their entire family,” he said. “Why wouldn’t you do that if you’re able?”

The two friends still speak each week. McIntyre has had a lot of post-transplant testing, and also takes anti-rejection medications to help her transplant take hold. That can pose a financial burden. The president of their high school class set up a GoFundMe page for McIntyre, which raised more than \$11,000 for her after-care costs. Hacker and his classmates then put together an online auction that raised nearly \$10,000 more for her. He helped by asking local businesses for donated items. “We had a great class of ’89 in high school. We’re close and know everybody,” he said of the endeavor.

Hacker loves having the topic of organ donation be in the forefront. Anyone considering it can follow the

#shareaspire hashtag and look into living donation programs, he said, adding, “They walk [you] through everything.”

Having a living donor causes much less shock to a recipient’s system than getting the organ from a deceased donor, Hacker said. According to the American Kidney Fund, kidneys from living donors have the potential to last almost twice as long as kidneys from deceased donors. Living donation surgery involves the same level of risk to the donor as any other major surgery. While there is not much data on the long-term effects of organ donation, overall longstanding risks are considered to be low.

The media attention that he and McIntyre received in local outlets has been great, Hacker said, to get the word out there about living organ donation. “If I get one person to do it, I have a part in saving another person’s life,” he said. “Who knows how many people this could affect?” **PR**

Food Drive won’t be held in May; Donor Drive continues

Due to restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Letter Carriers’ Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive will not be held on the second Saturday in May this year. NALC is committed to holding the event when it is safe to do so. In the meantime, the Stamp Out Hunger Donor Drive continues to raise funds for the hungry in communities throughout the country.

The need for food has only continued to grow through the pandemic. The economic crisis that the pandemic triggered has left millions of people unemployed and struggling to put food on the table, boosting pressure on food banks to fulfill the need. Some food banks that rely on our food drive have

reported three times the usual number of people asking for help. At the same time, the pandemic and ailing economy have pushed food donations down.

To meet the challenge of getting food to pantries, NALC turned last summer to a virtual Stamp Out Hunger Donor Drive. The virtual drive gives branches an opportunity to connect donors with food banks in their area for online donations and with resources to publicize the donor drive. In addition, branches have reached



out to their communities and local food drive partners to ask for online cash donations to local food banks. Branches also have given their own donations. The donor drive began in June, continued through the months that followed—and still is active today at nalc.org/food.

“Working together, whether for a traditional food collection or a donor drive, letter carriers will be there for people struggling to feed their families this year,” NALC President Fredric Rolando said, “just as we have been there the last 27 years.” **PR**