Wilson thankful for gift from Schwanz

Living with one kidney, instead of two, is no big deal to Elaine Schwanz of Gothenburg.

“God gave me two kidneys,” said the 45-year-old matter of factly. “And Lisa’s life was in the balance.”

The health of Lisa Wilson, who has lived with polycystic kidney disease for 21 years, had taken a nosedive.

Each night, Lisa would hook herself up to a dialysis machine to rid her body of impurities—a function her diseased kidneys could no longer perform.

In the spring of 2011, the process of finding a kidney donor began.

Several potential donors, including her husband Matt, didn’t meet the strict criteria needed for Lisa to receive the best kidney possible.

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DONOR INFORMATION

Anyone interested in learning more about the donor program can call Connie Lykke at the Nebraska Medical Center at (800) 401-4444.

Lisa and Elaine go back many years to when both had preschool-aged children and attended

Mothers of Preschoolers meetings.

In August of 2011, Elaine read about her friend's search for a compatible kidney donor in The Times and felt an urge to help her friend.

She called the University of Nebraska Medical Center to find out how she could.

Blood work followed over a six-month period. In January of 2012, tests showed the women's antibodies were a good, but not perfect, match.

After a trip to Omaha to visit with the transplant team and more testing—including psychological and financial—a date was set.

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On a searing July day, two days before the transplant, Lisa and Elaine and their families traveled again to UNMC—this time for Lisa to receive the gift that would help her continue her life.

The families had planned to dine together the night before the surgeries but a blood test from Wilson showed she had another antigen different than her donor.

Lisa was hooked up intravenously to receive anti-rejection medicine so her body would accept Elaine's kidney.

"I got so sick, I almost passed out so they slowed the process which took until 2 a.m.," Lisa explained.

When Lisa arrived at UNMC four hours later for surgery on July 31, she was dragging from fatigue and months of dialysis.

Across the hall in another room, Elaine felt chipper and ready to go.

“I was totally at peace,” she said.

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During four hours of surgery, doctors extracted a kidney from Elaine and shuttled it into another surgical room. They placed the organ into Lisa, leaving her diseased kidneys that had stopped functioning.

The women were told that the surgery is harder on the donor than the recipient.

“But the next morning (after the surgery), she wheeled herself over and patted me on the head,” Lisa said with a laugh.

Despite some minor discomfort, recovery from a five-inch incision and two laproscopic cuts, has gone well, Elaine said.

“I feel exactly the same as I did before the surgery,” she said.

Lisa endured more setbacks, an inner tear from a foot-long incision required a repair surgery and a week in the hospital.

“That was worse than the transplant,” she said.

And the anti-rejection medicine she must take means more healing time is needed.

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So far, tests show that Lisa’s body has accepted Elaine’s kidney.

Because the transplant is not a cure, Lisa said her body could reject the new kidney at any time.

But Lisa doesn’t dwell on that reality.

Instead, she’s discovered she finally feels free of being hooked up to dialysis equipment and watching family members lug around boxes of fluid and machinery.

“I can go out and not have to be home by 10 p.m. to get hooked up,” Lisa said.

On Wednesday (today), she plans to return to her job as a nurse in the cardiac rehabilitation department at Gothenburg Memorial Hospital.

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Both women felt God's presence in the process, especially in overcoming several hurdles until the time was right.

"Elaine said if it was meant to be, the Lord would see us through this," Lisa said. "I just had to trust and know God was in control of my life. His timing is amazing."

Elaine's unselfishness in donating a kidney is "amazing," she said.

"I'm thankful I'll be able to see my first grand baby in March and live a halfway normal life," she said.

Elaine is grateful she could help give Lisa a second chance.

She noted that 2,000 people in Nebraska are waiting for a kidney.

"If God puts it on your heart, just do it," she said. "If doors shut along the way, it's not meant to be."

Although donating a kidney is not a simple process, Lisa said it's also not as daunting as what many people believe.

"I wish there were more people like Elaine," she aid.

The process has connected the women, physically, emotionally and spiritually.

“Our friendship is a lot stronger,” Lisa said. “She’s like family.”

Elaine said, “When we’re sisters in Christ, we always feel connected.”

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