Kind hearts pool forces with physicians and donate new hopes while building new friendships.
Kidney

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she calmed down. Now she's proud of me."

Why not?» Brough said he wasn't even aware that people only needed one kidney until he tuned in to his favorite radio program, "This American Life," about two years ago.

In one segment, Chaya Lipshutz, a Jewish woman from Brooklyn, explained how she came to be what is called a "good Samaritan" donor. She was willing to give a kidney to help an ailing loved one. But none was a perfect match for the person they were trying to help.

Creating the chain » The pioneering group included sisters, brothers, husbands, cousins and friends, all willing to give a kidney to help an ailing loved one. But none was a perfect match for the person they were trying to help.

Six months passed before he got the phone call. Doctors found a match and more importantly, they needed his help to do something that has never been done before.

The kidney exchange was groundbreaking and not just because of the number of people involved. All seven of the recipients had developed antibodies that made traditional organ transplantation nearly impossible.

But a team of doctors, including Keith Melancon, the director of kidney transplants at Georgetown University Hospital, created a way to filter those antibodies out of the blood.

They call the procedure plasmapheresis. It should make it easier to perform kidney transplants, particularly for blacks who tend to have higher counts of antibodies.

Right now, there are about 6,000 people on dialysis in the Washington area and only about 250 kidney transplants are performed every year.

"Using plasmapheresis, we hope to double that number," Melancon said.

Not worth living » Elizabeth Garner had always been an active woman, deriving joy from chasing around her kids, grandkids and now her three great-grandchildren. But two years ago, her kidneys failed and she has survived only with the help of a dialysis machine that cleaned the toxins from her blood.

She was in constant pain and lethargic. She thought that dying wasn't such a bad option.

"I had got to the point that I didn't want to live. I had to be on dialysis," said Garner, who resides in Clinton, Md. "I know that dialysis keeps you alive, but a kidney lets you live."

Her husband, Larry McPhatter, was more than willing to give her one of his kidneys, but he wasn't a good match. So McPhatter agreed to do a stranger in exchange, Brough's kidney would go to his wife.

It was Brough's first major surgery and while he felt fairly comfortable with the science, he couldn't help being nervous.

"The whole time I felt a little selfish," he said. He had a young family and if something went wrong, who would take care of them?

His wife Misty was very excited when he told her of his plan, but she, too, became a little anxious in the days before the procedure.

The surgery went well and while he didn't know it, in another surgical bay in Georgetown University Hospital, his healthy kidney was being transplanted into Garner.

Brough spent two days in the hospital and a week later he was back in class. He went from feeling selfish to feeling oddly detached. He said it felt like he had his appendix removed and his life quickly returned to normal.

But just last week, the seven donors met the seven recipients, many for the first time. Brough looked up from his wheelchair to see a tall young white man coming her way. She started crying and simply couldn't stop.

"He almost lifted me out of the wheelchair to give me a hug," she said. "He gave me the most wonderful embrace."

Brough said he isn't normal. "I immediately felt a connection to her."

They held hands and tri to talk, but Garner had a hard time coming up with words to say because "thank you" seemed so small in that moment. Even now, weeks later, she still finds it difficult to express the magnitude of her appreciation.

"In his heart, he knew I wanted to help somebody because I thank God I was that person. He said, "He's a good man, such a loving man."

Brough, for his part, has had time explaining his feelings, too, saying the whole experience has been "very humbling."

Other than a small scar he is back to his normal routine, while Garner's life is dramatically altered.

Their story and that of this larger kidney exchange was profiled on the "Today Show," NBC's "Nightly News" and CNN among others. And while Brough said he is uncomfortable with all the attention, he does hope that he may inspire someone, just like Chaya Lipshutz inspired him.

And he plans on staying in touch with Garner and her husband, Larry.

"We'll be good friends for life," he said.

Once she gets a little stronger, Garner hopes she can do something for Brough.

"First thing I can do is be by-sit for him for a while, and they can go have some fun," she said. "That's what I told Jordan. His little kid was fit right in."

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Kidney donations in Utah

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Source: U.S. Health and Human Services, Interagency Donor Services

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