St. Louis woman donates a kidney to help beloved B’nai Amoona cantor emeritus

BY ELLEN FUTTERMAN
EDITOR

The idea began percolating three years ago, when a friend in Israel talked about how donating a kidney had changed her life. Lynnsie Balk Kantor was intrigued. “She wound up leaving her job and working for the organization that gets recipients for kidney donors in Israel,” said Kantor, 55, a St. Louis-area real estate agent and B’nai Amoona congregant.

A year later, a distant cousin of Kantor’s in Dallas needed a kidney and posted a phone number on Facebook for possible donors. “I called the number in Dallas but they never got back to me,” said Kantor, “so I put it out of my mind.”

Then this February, Kantor heard through Facebook and the B’nai Amoona grapevine that Hazan Leon S. Lissek, 81, needed a kidney. He had been the cantor at B’nai Amoona for 30 years, retiring in 1986 as cantor emeritus, a title he still holds. He and his wife, Michal, now live in Teaneck, N.J. The couple has three children and six grandchildren.

Kantor had grown up with Cantor Lissek’s family when I was growing up and we roots are in Brooklyn’s ultra-Orthodox community of Borough Park. Kantor’s father, Edward Balk, was president of B’nai Amoona for several years during Lissek’s tenure. “I remember being scared of the Hazan when I was little because he had this amazing, booming voice that could fill a massive room,” said Kantor. “He and his family were such a big part of our family when I was growing up and we stayed in touch after they left.”

The information Kantor had picked up from Lissek’s Facebook page pointed her to Renewal, a Brooklyn, N.Y.-based nonprofit that works to save lives through kidney donations. Founded in 2006, its roots are in Brooklyn’s ultra-Orthodox community of Borough Park.

Wanting to help Lissek, Kantor contacted Renewal and received a package, which instructed her to swab four areas inside her cheeks, then mail the swab sticks back. A blood test and cheek swabs are often the first steps in determining donor-recipient compatibility.

About a month later, on March 19, Lissek’s wife and son, along with Rabbi Josh Sturm, director of community outreach at Renewal, held an informational meeting at B’nai Amoona to answer questions about kidney donations. Kantor attended the meeting, which she said, speaking from the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center in Dallas, which has beds for as many as 5,000 people displaced by the storm. “We don’t impose [our faith] on anybody. We meet people who are very religious or not religious at all or just athe- ist. We listen to their stories and affirm what they have gone through.”

The clergy of all faiths are spiritual first responders, working with families as they arrive at shelters in Dallas and Fort Worth and partnering with local churches and faith-based organizations to do what Stern calls a “seamless carryover for con- tica care.”

“We are a crisis team, and during the long haul of rebuilding, Houston and Davenport and Beaumont and all these other places are going to need long-term care,” she said. “In the process we are cre- ating relationships with all of these faith- based groups.”

Spiritual care is perhaps a lesser-known facet of relief provided by the American Red Cross and other organizations on hand, including the Salvation Army and the National Guard. And it can discomfit some people who worry that clergy are there to make converts among distraught people. But Stern insists the work they do has nothing to do with proselytizing and
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found to be extremely educational and uplifting.

Sturm’s presentation included videos of living donors and recipients. He noted that kidney donation is considered a low-risk surgery for the donor, with few long-term complications, and has a very high rate of success for the recipient.

Sturm also spoke about Lisshek, who though in his 90s and significantly older than most kidney recipients, takes meticulous care of himself, working out regularly with a trainer and eating healthfully. He is in such good shape, in fact, that he didn’t yet need to be on dialysis, which is unusual for a patient waiting for a kidney.

If there was any doubt in Kantor’s mind, the Renewal presentation convinced her that donating a kidney was right for her. She also wondered if her kidney would be compatible and find its way to Cantor Lisshek.

The relationship between the Lissheks and the Bailes began when Hazzan/Cantor Leon Lisshek was hired by B’nai Amoona. The entire synagogue fell in love with his vibrant spirit and their three kids, Devorah, Shmuel and Shira. Though I was a shy girl at age 5 and said I was terrified of this big man as I studied for my bat mitzvah, I grew to understand what a gentle giant he was.

July 30th, 5:25 p.m. Lynnsie Balk

Kantor’s Facebook page

About 11 years ago, an acquaintance of Renew founder and chairman Mandy Reiner approached him, asking for help in finding a kidney. Reiner decided they should advertise in a couple of Jewish newspapers.

“Lo and behold,” Sturm said, “not only did they get a number of people who responded that they were willing to donate, but they also had a number of people who reached out and said, ‘Would you consider me?’

In-depth testing on live donors includes:

- In 2014, 15,107 kidney transplants took place in the United States. Of these, 11,570 came from deceased donors and 3,537 came from living donors.

11,570

On average:

- Every 14 minutes someone waiting for a life-saving kidney transplant.

11,570

13 people die each day while waiting for a life-saving kidney transplant.

11,570

For more information about becoming a kidney donor:

National Kidney Foundation: kidney.org

Renewal: Life-Renewal.org or 718-431-9831

Lynnsie Kantor said she has no physical restrictions placed on after donating a kidney, with the exception of no yoga or heavy lifting for six weeks. PHOTO: BILL MOTTICH

Organ donation and transplantation statistics

- There are currently more than 120,000 people waiting for lifesaving organ transplants in the United States. Of these, more than 100,000 await kidney transplants.

- The median wait time for an individual’s first kidney transplant is 3.6 years and can vary depending on health, compatibility and availability of organs. (Renewal says its goal is to match recipients with a donor within six months.)

- In 2014, 15,107 kidney transplants took place in the United States. Of these, 11,570 came from deceased donors and 3,537 came from living donors.

On average:

- Over 3,000 new patients are added to the kidney waiting list each month.

- Every 14 minutes someone is added to the kidney transplant list.
Jewish groups attack Trump’s call to end DACA program

BY RON KAMPES
FTA

An array of Jewish groups and lawmakers attacked as immoral President Donald Trump’s decision to end an Obama-era program granting protections to illegal immigrants who arrived in the United States as children.

The Trump administration said Monday that it would end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, program in six months. President Barack Obama had launched DACA in 2011 after multiple attempts failed in Congress to pass an immigration bill that would set the status of 11 million undocumented immigrants.

The program protected those who arrived as children from deportation and granted them legal status. In statements, Trump and Attorney General Jeff Sessions said the principal objection to Obama’s so-called Dreamers program was that it was unconstitutional because it was established by an executive order, and indicated that Trump was ready to sign any congressional legislation that would accommodate the “dreamers.”

It was unclear what would happen in the meantime or, should Congress not pass legislation, what would happen to the 800,000 people who have sought and received DACA’s protections.

Trump in a statement said his hand was forced as well by plans by attorneys general from conservative states to sue to kill DACA.

“The attorney general of the United States, the attorneys general of many states and virtually all other top legal experts have advised that the program is unlawful and unconstitutional and cannot be successfully defended in court,” he said.

Republican leaders in Congress have expressed a willingness to pass the legislation necessary to protect the affected immigrants, but Jewish groups and lawmakers said the program presented immoral perils, given the failures of Congress in the past to agree on

Michael Kantor’s daughter, Nava, 27, admits she gets “anxious” about medical procedures, so she was more than a little concerned about her mother’s decision to donate her kidney. Kantor took some comfort in knowing that as a donor, should her mother need a kidney in the future, she could be moved to the top of the waiting list.

“Mostly, I’m really proud of her,” said Nava, a social worker at the Missouri Foundation for Health. “My mom has been very open sharing every part of her experience on social media. I hope the result is that more people become donors.”

Rabbi Carnie Rose of N’nai Amsona calls Kantor a “hero.” He also notes that Lissek’s situation inspired another congregate to get tested, and she, too, plans to donate as soon as possible.

“She is a true hero,” said Kantor. “She doesn’t see herself that way at all. In fact, she bristles at the suggestion. ‘I am definitely not a hero. I am just someone who helps well and doesn’t particularly mind medical stuff or is terrified by it,’ said Kantor. ‘I was healthy enough to do it and for everything else there is Xanax.”

“If I was going to give my heart, then I’d be a hero. But a kidney is a spare part. I wish more people would do it.”