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TWO MIRACLE FAMILIES IN KIDNEY SWAP

By JENNIFER FERMINO



BONDED: Farrah Rubin (left) donated a kidney meant for her sister to Maria Quinones (right).

December 25, 2007 -- Two families, strangers until a heart-tugging meeting last week, are each thanking the other for giving them the best Christmas present in the world - the gift of life. Jodi Kule-Nagel, 46, and Maria Quinones, 62, both desperately needed a new kidney. But Kule-Nagel, from Manhattan, and Quinones, from South Bound Brook, NJ, shared something else.

Both had family members - Quinones' son and Kule-Nagel's sister - who were willing to donate a kidney to their needy relative. The problem for each of the donors was that they were not compatible for their particular family member.

Then, about a month ago, doctors at New York Presbyterian Hospital Columbia University Medical Center devised a solution that left both families believing in holiday miracles.

Maria Quinones' son, Eligio, 41, would give his kidney to Kule-Nagel, who had been plagued with kidney problems her entire life and was experiencing the beginnings of renal failure.

In turn, Kule-Nagel's sister, Farrah Rubin, promised to give her kidney to Maria Quinones.

"I didn't hesitate. I just said, 'Let's do it,' " said Eligio Quinones Jr., whose diabetic mother had been undergoing kidney dialysis for two long years.

Rubin, 39, also agreed to a switch. "When they told me I wasn't a match, I said I want to do a swap," she said.

Luckily, the perfect strangers were perfect matches with each other in blood and tissue type. All four had surgery on the same day two weeks ago.

But they never met until last Friday, when the hospital arranged a meeting in a reception room at New York-Presbyterian.

Eligio Quinones didn't even know the gender of the person he saved until Kule-Nagel walked into the room.

Both pairs embraced in an emotional get-together that had almost everyone - relatives, doctors, nurses, even a Post reporter - reaching for the tissues.

"Thank you," said Kule-Nagel as she hugged Eligio Quinones.

As happy as she was, Kule-Nagel got some shocking news.

"We told you a little white lie," said Maureen Carroll, the hospital's transplant coordinator. "We said it was a Yankees family."

Eligio Quinones broke the news to her that he's a Met fan.

"As long as its not Red Sox!" laughed Kule-Nagel.

Dr. Lloyd Ratner, the hospital's director of renal and pancreatic transplantation, said the medical center has been involved in 15 swaps such as these since 2004. He estimates if more such swaps occurred, they could grow the donor pool by 30 percent.

Dr. Roman Nowygrod, Kule-Nagel's surgeon, said, "Other institutions are starting to adopt it based on the success we've had."

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