

School Principal's Kidney Donation Teaches Compassion and the Power of Giving

By Dawn Borman, *The Kansas City Star*

The kindergarten students at Madison Place Elementary School in Olathe are too young to comprehend what it means to have kidney disease.

But because of their principal, Gary Stevenson, they know a lot more about compassion and the power of giving.

News that he was on leave after donating one of his kidneys to a friend traveled fast at the school.

The lesson started last fall when Stevenson sat down for lunch with a kindergarten teacher's aide, Kris Burke. He wanted an update on her husband, Kerrin Burke, and his struggle with kidney disease.

"I just " Stevenson said. nonchalantly asked, 'How's Kerrin doing?'

The truth was that his health was declining as he waited for a donor. Yet his wife was upbeat and optimistic.

"How do you go about finding out if you can donate?" Stevenson asked the teacher's aide.

Donor candidates must go through rigorous tests, she told him. And any donor would need to match Kerrin Burke's blood type — A-positive.

Stevenson's response was immediate.

"Well, *I'm* A-positive."

The principal made his decision right there. He was on the phone days later making inquiries with the hospital.

The blood type was hardly the only obstacle. Stevenson submitted to months of tests and several false medical alarms.

All the while, Kerrin Burke was taking it a day at a time. Sometimes he could play with his children. Other days he didn't have the energy to accomplish basic tasks.

He took long-term disability from his information technology job at a law firm.

Burke was diagnosed with kidney failure in 2001. Doctors never confirmed the cause but said they believed a virus was responsible. "I was fortunate to have my best friend step up and be a non-related living donor," Burke said.

A first kidney transplant in 2001 went well, and he was able to get back to work. But problems returned and became pronounced about a year ago. Medical officials said his problems were not uncommon. By last March, Burke became one of nearly 75,000 nationally on a list waiting for a kidney.

Eventually, the hospital approved the principal for donation. He called Kerrin Burke with the news.

Even after months of preparation, Stevenson's willingness stunned Burke.

"The first time, the person was my best friend. You would expect a best friend to be there for you and do whatever they can. But here's a man who hardly knew me," he said.

Once the two men got to know each other better, they discovered a common bond.

"I didn't know about his strong faith at the time," Burke said. "When I found out about it, it was kind of like the 'aha moment'."

Both families rely heavily on their Christian faith for guidance.

Stevenson didn't hesitate to move ahead. Some questioned his decision, asking what would happen should someone in his family need a kidney someday. It made him reflect even more on the Burke children.

"If I can do something to help somebody else out of a situation that they're going through, by all means I want to do that. I've tried to live my life as an example not only to my own two boys, but also to the students I serve as principal," he said.

"A life of gratitude and reaching out to those around you is a life well lived."

The surgeries last month for both men were successful.

Kerrin Burke said he didn't need a doctor to tell him the surgery worked. He knew "as soon as I woke up."

Living donors who are unrelated used to be rare.

But the scenario is gradually increasing and now accounts for as many as 25 percent of all living donations, said Bryan Becker, president of the National Kidney Foundation.

Stevenson said he hopes to soon start back to work. Burke's recovery is likely to take months.

Meanwhile, Madison Place students and families have pitched in to help by providing meals for the families, just as they have done when families at the school have been in need.

The support and new friendship have Stevenson wondering who the benefactor in this situation is.

"I would argue that there's much to be gained from giving," he said. "I don't like to think of myself as a selfish person, but in some sense, in giving, I've gained."