

Eleven-year friendship started with kidney donation

Eleven years ago, a very ill young father received the Christmas gift of a lifetime.

“When you are so sick, the hope that something can happen, that it can turn around, it gives you a few extra years in your life. You get out of bed better, you function differently. You were in a state of hopelessness, of total despair, and suddenly there’s this angel,” Olaf Sztaba told The B.C. Catholic.

His “angel” was Madeleine Mulaire, an elementary school teacher and perfect stranger. Eleven years ago, she offered him the gift of a kidney

Sztaba had been suffering serious health problems for many years, starting with a mysterious viral infection that put him in an intensive care unit for six months and resulted in several complications including flesh-eating disease and kidney failure.

“I reached a point when doctors said I wouldn’t be able to leave the hospital,” said Sztaba. “There was a moment when some doctors asked for my wife’s permission to disconnect me from life support because there was no hope for me.”

After six months in the ICU, Sztaba, his wife Kasia, and their young son moved from Calgary to Vancouver to be closer to relatives. For the next three years, Sztaba spent four hours in the hospital three days a week for dialysis.

“I was very sick. Dialysis was not working well for me, and I had big problems with blood pressure and other issues. Everybody knew I needed a transplant,” he said.

And, he needed a transplant soon. His parents, in-laws, and siblings were tested, but they were not a match or had other underlying health conditions that prevented them from donating.

“I reached a point where I was so depressed I just gave up,” said Sztaba of those events in 2006. His wife, “in an act of desperation on her side, drove to our parish to pray.”

Kasia arrived at St. Clare of Assisi Parish and saw her pastor Rev. Craig Scott. When she described her husband’s situation to him, Father Scott agreed they could publish a notice in the parish bulletin and even offered to be tested himself.

The notice that a parishioner needed a kidney was published every week, about

as often as Sztaba went to the emergency room. A few parishioners stepped up, but none were a match.

Desperate, Kasia asked five other parishes in the neighbourhood to publish the notice as well. That's when Mulaire really noticed the message. She was a member of St. Clare of Assisi Parish and had heard about a father in his thirties who needed a kidney transplant, but figured someone else in the large parish would help him.

Then, while visiting Our Lady of Fatima in early July and noticing the same message in their bulletin, "it struck me. This person must be in dire need."

Mulaire phoned the parish and set up a meeting with the family at a coffee shop. "He was terribly sick. It was obvious. He was skinny and sick, his whole face and demeanour showed it."

They spent 2 1/2 hours talking, with Mulaire asking everything she could about his Polish roots, his illness, and his family. "He was going through all this at such a young age!"

She asked how she could help, and Kasia hesitantly pulled out a pamphlet about organ donation. Mulaire took it home and couldn't stop thinking about it.

"Whenever I'm questioning things and I don't have answers, I go to my garden and I start mucking around," she said. "The answer that came to me was: Why not?"

Mulaire was not satisfied with that answer, so she kept working. Then, she remembered: "I had a near-death experience in 1991. I really did come very close to dying. I was pregnant with a third child and my uterus ruptured." When she arrived at emergency, doctors had no idea what happened and couldn't find a pulse.

The teacher suddenly felt she'd been given a second chance at life for this moment. She underwent tests and in mid-August, found out she was a match for Sztaba.

"I had to take it all in. This is big. Someone is acting upon us. To me, that was God. For me it was very spiritual and a very deep calling," she said. "I couldn't live with myself if I said no."

Sztaba, suffering health issues and a deep depression, felt a ray of hope enter his life. "This hope that Madeleine gave me, even if it didn't work out, it would be the greatest gift I'd received," he said.

"I started thinking about all of those years back when I was in hospital and I met all these remarkable people in my life who were helping me along the way."

Small acts of kindness, plus Mulaire's "great finale," gave Sztaba hope and strength. "I try, every day, to make one act of kindness, even a little one. That's the core of my faith. I didn't understand this so profoundly before the transplant."

The surgery went through successfully Nov. 28, 2006. Sztaba and Mulaire have since gone from complete strangers to close friends.

"It is like having a sister," he said. They share a parish, a Catholic faith, and regular cups of coffee at a favourite cafe in Coquitlam. In 2016, they celebrated the 10th anniversary of the transplant with a road trip to Mulaire's family in Winnipeg.

Sztaba believes he would not be alive now without Mulaire's incredible gift. He's since spent 11 more anniversaries with Kasia, seen his son's 17th birthday, and left a career in finance for his dream job as full-time photographer.

It was a life-changing experience for his kidney donor, too.

"It just opened up my heart to loving people even more," said Mulaire, who found herself flying to Africa one year later to teach.

She's since created Yaakaar Women Helping Women, a group that teaches women in Senegal to read, write, and run small businesses. "The transplant really opened my heart to not be afraid, not to get that first reaction of fear, but let it sit there and see how it can change you."