

## “Renewal—A Kidney Transplant Success Story”

In August, Barry Strom had a kidney transplant with a living donation from his wife, Ellen. A wonderful Jewish organization called Renewal helped them on this journey. This is their story.

In March 2019 my doctor said, “transplant or dialysis.” After seventeen years of dealing with very slowly failing kidneys, the time to do something dramatic had arrived. After meeting with a dialysis patient, I quickly decided that transplant before needing dialysis was the way to go. Now what? Where to turn? What to do? My brother and his wife knew of an organization called Renewal that helped with kidney transplants. Some quick research showed Renewal’s main mission was to find people to donate kidneys and educate them about the process. To encourage donation Renewal mitigates the potential financial loss related to kidney donation by paying for the donor’s transportation and lodging and replacing lost wages due to the surgery and recovery. Their website also helped us better understand the process of being tested as a donor and the actual surgery.

I soon spoke to Rivky at Renewal. She had me register with them and said if I had any potential donors, they should also register. In short order, I had five potential donors. My wife Ellen, my brother Hank, my son Dustin, my niece Ariella, and her husband Adam. I was extremely moved and gratified by this most physical outpouring of love. I was, of course, also very lucky. There are currently more than 400 patients on Renewal’s waiting list in need of a kidney. On the average, the wait time for a kidney on the national list is 5-7 years!

Having potential donors, Rivky told me to contact one of the five hospitals in the Metro NYC area with which they work. Weill Cornell was the top of the list. I called as instructed, and said I was working with Renewal. Renewal is well known at these hospitals and well respected. The hospitals know that if you’re with Renewal you are well informed. One of the nephrologists on the Weill Cornell transplant team is on Renewal’s medical board. I scheduled an appointment for just over a month later.

On April 29, I had a full day initial screening appointment. Ellen’s blood was drawn to test as a potential donor. Ellen, of course, was a genetic long shot, so there was no real reason to believe she would be a match. Because we share the most genetic similarities, it was likely that my brother and son would be the closest match. My brother, niece, and her husband had blood drawn on May 3, my brother’s birthday. Dustin had blood drawn 10 days later in Ithaca. Around May 10, we were told that Ellen and my brother were both 4/6 matches and could potentially be donors. The results for Ellen were astonishing and even the coordinator at Weill Cornell was shocked. Although Dustin’s results were not yet in, we were told to choose between Ellen and my brother. I said, somewhat jokingly, that I’d take the younger kidney since Ellen is nine years young than my brother. Upon reflection, everyone agreed.

By the end of May, Ellen was medically cleared to be a donor and I was likewise cleared to be a recipient. We were given a transplant date of August 15, the day after the surgeon returned from vacation. Better after vacation than the day before! At this point, we thought that Renewal was out of the picture – we were wrong.

About two weeks before the transplant, Toby of Renewal contacted Ellen. She was there to answer any questions and address any concerns that Ellen had about the procedure. Toby explained the procedure and the post-donation recovery, warning about the pains caused by gas used to aid the kidney extraction and the importance of walking as soon after the surgery as possible to help it work its way out. Although Ellen was never nervous about the procedure, she found the conversation reassuring and was impressed that all the people at Renewal cared so much. Toby said that Renewal would bring her food while in the hospital and would reimburse her for meals after her discharge. For donors with lost wages, travel expenses, lodging expenses for convalescence, childcare, and house help, Renewal provides compensation. Renewal's philosophy is that donation should not be a financial burden. The average cost to Renewal per transplant is \$18,900. Ellen has reflected many times on how important Renewal is to donors whose support system is not as strong as hers and are donating anonymously.

The day of the surgery, we were accompanied by our daughter, Jessica, and my sister-in-law, Judy. We were met in the pre-surgical preparation room by Rabbi Moshe of Renewal, who had been a kidney donor himself. He was so moved by his experience that he switched from a full-time assistant rabbi position to part-time so he could work full time for Renewal. Rabbi Moshe was very friendly and funny and put everyone at ease. We appreciated that he recognized that we were not as religious as he was but was totally accepting of us and modified his language accordingly. He made a little video of Ellen and me which could still go viral. Keep on clicking!

During the surgery, Toby texted Jessica letting her know that lunch had been left for her and Judy and just to check in. In the waiting room, Toby's husband Ahron, a donor himself, visited Jessica and Judy and tried to ease their nervousness. Ahron also visited Ellen in the recovery room and another Renewal person, David, visited me in the recovery room. In the days following the surgery, both Ellen and I were visited in the hospital by several people affiliated with Renewal, many of them donors themselves. Rabbi Moshe also visited again, and we received texts from Toby and many others. Even though Jessica was with us in the hospital every day, this was particularly appreciated since we were far from home and friends. Once Ellen was discharged, on Saturday after the Thursday surgery, Toby called Ellen every other day for the next two weeks. Both Ellen and I were provided with post-transplant carrying bags with items to help in our recovery including my well used Renewal "kidney hydration station" water bottles and Ellen's kidney pillow. Renewal proved to be a major part of our transplant experience, providing comfort and sustenance to us all during a physically and emotionally trying time.

In all, Renewal is a wonderful organization which does great work with a staff of only eleven. They have facilitated more than 600 kidney transplants. Renewal is an Orthodox Jewish organization and is most active in the Orthodox community, so 85-90% of their donors are currently from that community. However, a majority of the recipients are not Orthodox Jews, and some are non-Jews. Renewal does not limit its search for donors to the New York area, but has flown donors from the West coast and the South. Renewal holds programs at various synagogues to educate about donation. There are currently more than 400 patients in need of a kidney on Renewal's waiting list. More information about Renewal can be found in the vestibule. *Whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world.* Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:9; Yerushalmi Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 37a.