



# 21/22 REFLECTIONS

## Chapter 7 – The Gift of Life

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***For today's message, I'm sharing a reflection from one of our teammates about the gift of life she offered to a stranger.***

It feels right to send this note during Kidney Disease Awareness Month, as I consider the various ways we at SHHS change lives for the better through our empathy and altruistic spirit. It comes from Judy Chiasson, a coordinator with Human Relations, Diversity & Equity. Thank you, Judy!

### A FLASHBULB MOMENT

Some moments are seared into our memories. February 11, 2019 was a postcard-sunny California day when I received the call from the hospital. My test results were good; I was approved to become a kidney donor. I drove to the gym. I needed to swim. The rhythmic *stroke, stroke, breathe* soothed my mind as the enormity of that call sank in. Careful what you ask for.

I hadn't told a soul about my plan. I wanted to spare my loved ones a roller coaster of emotions if I wasn't approved or changed my mind. One daughter thought it was pretty cool; the other summarily forbade me to donate. My mother cried. My siblings were speechless. They struggled to understand. My words rang shallow, "*Why not?*"

My interest in donating grew slowly, encouraged by talk show stories, Facebook posts, bumper stickers, overheard conversations at Starbucks... I learned about UCLA's Advance Donor Program which allows a donor to designate a loved

one for priority consideration should they ever need a kidney. A stranger would get my healthy kidney; my brother-in-law who has polycystic kidney disease (PKD) would be prioritized for a kidney if he ever needed it. Win-win.

Organ donation is the gift of life, but donations to strangers are rare. Only 6% of the living kidney donations in 2021 were non-direct (stranger) donations. What makes this tiny percentage of donors so unique? Turns out, there's a [physiological reason](#). Researcher Abigail Marsh found that altruistic donors' increased gray matter in their amygdalae makes them exceptionally empathetic. Though the amygdalae of SHHS team members have not been studied, I can bet that there is increased gray matter among us, as exceptional empathy is a hallmark of our stewardship of students, families, and each other.

On June 18, 2019, I went to UCLA and donated my kidney to a stranger. The next day I met my recipient. We cried. We embraced. Strangers whose lives are now intertwined forever. It has been three years since I donated. Some details are fading, but I remember the phone call, the reaction of my family, the support of my dear colleagues in Student Health & Human Services, and, most of all, meeting Susan.

**March is Kidney Disease Awareness** month. About 15% of adults in the United States have chronic kidney disease. Nearly 100,000 people are on the transplant list to receive a kidney. Sadly, 12 a day will die waiting.

There are many different ways to [support and advocate](#) for organ donation, should you feel moved to do so. If you are interested in becoming a donor upon death, you can register through [Donate Life California](#) at the DMV. If you want to learn more about living kidney donation, you can visit the [National Kidney Foundation](#) or [UCLA's Living Donor Program](#). There's a wonderful community of donors to support you along the way.

*Sincerely,*  
**Pia and Judy**

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