

A friend's lifesaving gift of a kidney.

Bernie (Bernette) Richardson was in her 30s when she first experienced a fever that wouldn't go away. Concerned, she went to the doctor and learned that like her father and other family members, she had polycystic kidney disease. The condition causes cysts to grow in the kidneys and, over time, the cysts can not only cause kidney damage, but they can also spread to the liver and other locations in the body.

To protect her kidneys, Bernie, who is now in her early 70's, immediately started following a renal diet low in sodium, phosphorus, and protein. "I became very protective of my health," she explains. Although she religiously followed the diet for 10 years, over time her kidneys were damaged by the disease and eventually she had to go on dialysis while she waited for a kidney transplant.

Dialysis was a very difficult experience for Bernie. She had to undergo dialysis three days a week and had problems with the needle in her fistula dislodging, causing pain and swelling in her arm. In addition to the discomfort, dialysis

interrupted Bernie's life. "It was time consuming and I missed a lot of things that I wanted to do. It was a real lifestyle change for me. I had such an active and busy lifestyle before, but during that period most of my time was spent on dialysis or recovering from it. While I was only on dialysis four weeks, it felt like four years."

Even though Bernie was living with this serious illness, few people knew. Says her friend of 15 years Wanda McCullough, "She didn't look sick. Our husbands are deacons and in a men's group at church, and Bernie's husband had asked the group to pray for her at one point but didn't say why. One day we had gone to a knitting supply store together and I asked Bernie why her husband had asked for the prayers. She said her kidneys were failing and she needed a transplant. Before that day, I didn't have a clue that she was sick."

After learning about her friend's need for a kidney, Wanda had a revelation. "God told me I was going to be Bernie's kidney donor," she says. "I had several experiences that helped reinforce that. I went home to Louisiana for a visit and ran into a cousin I hadn't seen in years. My cousin had had a kidney transplant and was doing well. A person whom I saw at church was also a kidney donor. This was confirmation of my decision because I had not seen them in several years. But when I told Bernie, she didn't want to talk about the possibility of me being her donor."

Several people had already offered to donate a kidney, but Bernie says, "When I gave them the paperwork they needed to complete, I never heard back from them and they avoided me. I didn't want the issue of donation to ruin my friendship with Wanda, so I didn't pursue it."

Wanda, however, wasn't going to give up that easily. She went to MedStar Georgetown Transplant Institute and moved through the needed pre-donation evaluation and testing, learning she was healthy and able to donate, with minimal risk to herself. Wanda and her husband arranged to go out to dinner with Bernie and her husband so Wanda could share the good news with her friend.

"When I told her I was cleared to donate to her, she couldn't say a word, and Bernie is very outgoing," Wanda remembers with a smile.

The transplant, performed in June 2017, was a complete success. "Before the transplant, my kidney function was only 5 percent" Bernie explains. "Now it's 100 percent. My quality of life is back to normal. I'm back to work as

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Bernie Richardson, left, with her friend Wanda McCullough, who became her living kidney donor.

a third-grade teacher, have a successful home-based business, am active as a deaconess at my church, and am a frequent traveler. I had no pain or complications from the transplant surgery. My hospital stay was minimal. Transplant is the way to go. Dialysis patients shouldn't fear the transplant process. Dialysis, in my opinion, is 200 percent harder."

Bernie and Wanda have some good advice for kidney recipients and donors. "You have to tell your story," says Bernie. "People can't donate if they don't know you need a kidney. And many people aren't aware that living donation is an option. That's why I speak at community presentations with MedStar Georgetown Transplant Institute. I'm glad to educate people about the option that saved my life."

"It's important for anyone interested in giving the Gift of Life that living donor safety is our top priority at MedStar

Georgetown Transplant Institute," says Matthew Cooper, MD, director of Kidney and Pancreas Transplantation. "Also, as Bernie and Wanda's story shows, it's not as difficult as one might think to meet criteria to become a living donor. Regardless of blood type and an overemphasis of 'matching' in the media, if individuals are cleared to safely donate, we can often make living donor transplantation a reality for patients seeking a life better than dialysis, including through our very successful paired kidney exchange program."

Adds Wanda, "A lot of people are afraid, but I want them to know living donors can live a healthy, full life with one kidney. Don't be fearful. Be open to the conversation about being a donor."

These photos were selected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. All patients and providers are expected to follow the current MedStar Health guidelines for safety including proper masking and physical distancing where appropriate. Learn more at [MedStarHealth.org/Safe](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/Safe).

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