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'You gave me a new life' St. Charles gymnastics coach receives kidney donation

By Patrick Waldron Daily Herald Staff Writer

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Margaret Koczwar's kidney problems didn't sneak up on her. To some degree, she has been dealing with troubles since she was a teenage gymnast in Poland 15 years ago.

But to Koczwar, 31, now a Geneva resident and coach at the St. Charles Gymnastics Club, the prospect of kidney failure and perhaps a transplant remained only a distant possibility through most of her adult life.

"My kidneys were stable for such a long time," she said.

By contrast, for his 30 years, Shawn Bowlden, also a St. Charles Gymnastics Club coach, had been healthy and his only thoughts about organ transplantation came every four years when he signed the back of his driver's license.

But this spring as Koczwar's condition deteriorated into kidney failure, Bowlden got a quick education.

A week ago today, he became a live organ donor, giving up one of his kidneys for his friend and colleague.

It was an act that Koczwar says set her free and spared her from a life limited by the constraints of kidney dialysis.

"You gave me a new life," Koczwar said to her donor this week, standing in the center of the St. Charles Gymnastic Club as the team they both coach practiced behind them. "Really, it's like getting a new life."

Change for the better

Public awareness campaigns for organ donation have come a long way in the past decade, but still, finding a donor is far from simple, especially with live donors.

A kidney was the first human organ to be successfully transplanted from a live patient, according to the United Network for Organ Sharing. In 1954, doctors completed a successful transplant between two identical twins.

A half-century later, kidney transplants are the most common organ sharing procedure. Last year, 6,460 kidney transplants from live donors were completed in the United States, according to the Organ Procurement and Transplant Network.

Still, more than 58,590 people in this country are waiting for a kidney, according to national statistics.

National statistics also show that a large majority of live donors are relatives - a sister, brother, parent or spouse.

Those are exactly the people Koczwar thought she would rely on.

In fact, by the time her kidneys failed in April, she'd already talked to family members about one of them becoming a live donor for her.

"I have a brother and sister and thought they were my match," Koczwar said. "As

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soon as I went on dialysis I called them."

But somehow, somewhere the key facts got mixed up and Koczwara was left with the reality that her O blood type was incompatible with her siblings.

"It was actually a shocker," she said. "It was a couple of days before I had to go to the hospital."

Help for Koczwara, a wife and mother of three adopted Polish children, would have to come from somewhere else.

Since the spring, Koczwara had done her dialysis at the gym. The parents and their young gymnasts knew about her medical issues and that those problems also made it impossible for her to have children, leading to her family's decision two years ago to adopt.

At first she turned to Ingrid Luse of Elburn, another coach at the club and enthusiastic volunteer for help. But, just as with Koczwara's husband, George, and her family, the blood was a mismatch.

"Shawn and I were out one night and we were talking about me donating," Luse said. "That's when Shawn said 'I'll donate.'æ"

Luse helped arrange Bowlden's test and before Koczwara really even knew what had happened, he was ready to go.

"It's a tough question to try and ask somebody," Luse said.

After some encouragement, Koczwara asked Bowlden for help.

"I didn't hesitate too much," said Bowlden, recalling his decision process. "If I am a match, I am going to go ahead and do this."

On June 25 he was wheeled into the operating room at Northwestern Memorial Hospital ready to give up a kidney. Koczwara followed two hours behind him, ready to take it.

She called Bowlden's actions a surprise and an incredible gift.

"There are no words to express how appreciated" Koczwara said, her emotions forcing her to stop in mid-thought. "I hope he knows I appreciate it. There are not enough words to describe it."

A modest, though sore, Bowlden takes it all in a matter-of-fact way.

"We were meant to meet or something," he said. "Something played a part in us coming together."

Twists of fate

A little fate could be hard for most to deny in this situation.

Koczwara was born in Poland and came to the United States at age 19 on a gymnastics scholarship to Northern Illinois University.

After graduation she worked as a gymnastics coach in Warrenville but soon after got a similar job at a gym in Naperville.

That was in 1997 and where she first met Bowlden, who is originally from Atlanta, attended University of Illinois at Chicago and then bounced around a few coaching jobs himself.

By 1998 both of them would be transferred to the St. Charles Gymnastics Club.

To add to the mystique, other coaches at the club point out that Bowlden almost took

a job at a different facility last year but, after some arguing and lobbying, was persuaded to stay.

Even Luse remembers telling Koczwara not to discourage him from leaving.

"If he needs to go, let him go," Luse recalled saying to her friend.

Of course no one knew what was coming just a year down the road. He stayed and become much more than just another coach.

"What are the chances?" Luse said.

Kidney: Donor says they were meant to meet

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