

A NEIGHBORLY BOND

South Orange's Michael Sang needed a kidney transplant. Little did he know his donor match lived next door.

Most of us can say we've borrowed sugar or milk from a friendly neighbor in a pinch, but how many of us can say their neighbor gave them a kidney? Michael Sang can.

Mike and his wife, Miriam, and youngest daughter, now 10, live in South Orange, where they were friendly with Steve Mura, his wife, Judy, and two young daughters who moved in next door. In late 2021, Steve, 38, noticed that Mike wasn't outside barbecuing as often as he normally would. Meanwhile, Judy tutored Mike's daughter in math, and during her weekly visits observed his health deteriorating. "She'd notice Mike's limp or his cane, and asked his wife if he was OK," Steve tells *Morris/Essex Health & Life*. The wives got to talking, at which point Miriam revealed her husband was on dialysis and would need a kidney transplant.

Immediately, Steve says, Judy contemplated donating her kidney. "We've had organ donations in the family because my father-in-law had a liver transplant six years ago," he says. "We've seen the positive impact of organ donation, and how it gave him more time with his family."

Through initial research, the Muras realized Judy likely wasn't a good candidate for living organ donation, so Steve considered becoming a donor. "It took me about 10 seconds to decide to apply," he says. The next day, he filled out the donor questionnaire on the Cooperman Barnabas Medical Center (CBMC) website and went through the entire screening process without telling Mike.

In the meantime, Steve did a lot of research on kidney donation and readied his body just in case he'd be undergoing the surgery. Steve is a professional running coach, and in January 2022, amped up his training and ran a half marathon to get in the best shape of his life. Months later, he got a call from the transplant center that he was a match for his friend.

"Finding out was like winning the lottery," Mike, 49, says, recalling how dialysis tore him down physically and emotionally. "I started

crying. How often does it happen that your next-door neighbor is a match and he's willing to give you a kidney?"

Once both donor and recipient were cleared for surgery—Mike's clearance took a little bit longer due to some other pre-existing health issues that required evaluation and resolution — it was all systems go, and the transplant surgery took place in June of 2022 at the Renal and Pancreas Transplant Division at Cooperman Barnabas Medical Center. "It's like going to get an oil change at a gas station," Mike, a medical biller, says of his experience at CBMC. "It was that simple and painless."

Steve speaks highly of his experience at CBMC too. "I felt like the whole team cared about my well-being," he says. He left the hospital two days post-op, and started running "a slow mile" six weeks later. Other than discomfort at the incision site, Steve says he didn't experience any pain.

Now, almost a year later, both donor and recipient are thriving. In March, Steve flew to Tanzania with Living Donor Adventures, a group of donors, recipients and surgeons that he got involved with via Facebook. They summited at Mount Kilimanjaro on March 9, World Kidney Day (photo at right), to raise awareness for kidney donation and prove that you can live your life normally after donating an organ. He's also training for a marathon, and says he feels "100 percent the same" as he did before he donated his kidney.

"The best part was the returning smell of BBQ wafting from Mike's yard, and seeing the life go back into his body," says Steve. "If I had three kidneys, I'd donate again. This experience has changed my life."

Mike is still recovering, but he's getting better every day and sees his new kidney as a new lease on life. "I really felt like my life was over [when I was doing dialysis]," he notes. "I always tell Steve he saved my life, and he's my brother from another mother. There's really no way that I can fully express my gratitude."



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—Michael Sang, kidney donor recipient, Cooperman Barnabas Medical Center