

# To My Brother With Love

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Our Kidney Transplant Journey

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Meremel Group LLC

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# Dedication

For Jason—my little brother, my friend, and my reminder that God’s grace is greater than any obstacle. And for every donor, recipient, and family walking their own transplant journey—may you find hope, strength, and faith for the road ahead.

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# Foreword

By Eugene Wilkerson, Ph.D., SPHR

Over the years, I have been blessed to know the author, Dr. Melody Rawlings, not just as a colleague and fellow professor in the business school, but as a kindred spirit whose journey has continually inspired me. Our shared backgrounds—rooted in academia and the strength of faith—has forged a bond that transcends professional connection. Melody's upbringing on a Kentucky farm and my own family's legacy among Tennessee's black farmers remind me that resilience and purpose are often cultivated in humble beginnings.

When Melody invited me to write this forward, I felt honored. When I sat down to read her story of contemplating kidney donation, I discovered that we share another personal connection that we never talked about. My younger brother is also named Jason. Sometimes,

life's intersections are more than coincidence—this is a divine appointment that stirred unexpected emotions.

The story of Melody and Jason is a reminder that we are truly our brother's keeper, called to serve and uplift one another. This book is a testament to faith, courage, and the power of answering God's call. Through Melody's example, we are reminded of three enduring truths:

Lead with love and compassion for others.

When the Holy Spirit speaks, it brings clarity and conviction that cannot be ignored.

In times of uncertainty, trust in divine guidance—"In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths" (Proverbs 3:6).

Thank you, Melody, for showing us what it means to choose love and faith, even in the face of life's greatest challenges. Your story will inspire not only those facing transplants but also anyone navigating difficult decisions. May your journey encourage others to listen for their calling and step forward with courage.

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# Introduction

If we were sitting down together over coffee, this is the story I'd tell you — a story about family, faith, love, and the unexpected ways God shows up when we least expect it. It began long before the word “transplant” ever entered my vocabulary, and it taught me more about grace, resilience, and joy than I could have ever imagined. This is the story of how I came to give one of my kidneys to my younger brother, Jason.

This booklet was written from the heart, not as a medical guide, but as a lived testimony of love, faith, and God's goodness. It shares the journey of donating a kidney to my younger brother, Jason, and the many lessons we uncovered along the way through prayer, courage, unexpected laughter, and grace.

Whether you're reading this as a potential donor, a recipient, a caregiver, or just someone curious about what it's like to experience a transplant, I pray you find en-

couragement in these pages. God is faithful, and even when the path is hard, He provides the strength and the people to walk it with us.

If there's one message I hope you take away, it's this: health is a gift, and so is life. Every choice we make in life, big or small, matters—what we eat, how we move, how we care for our bodies, and how we love and care for one another. And when life calls us to step into something hard, whether it's donating an organ, changing our lifestyle, or supporting someone we love through a health crisis, we don't walk that road alone. If God brings us to it, He will see us through it.

Jason and I are forever grateful for the second chance he's been given, and we hope our story inspires others to live more intentionally, love more deeply, and say "yes" when love calls.

Thank you for joining me on this journey.

With gratitude,

Melody

## Baby Brother on the Farm

What a surprise when Mom and Dad announced that my older brother and I were going to have a new sibling! I think they were surprised too. As a 12-year-old girl, I could not have been more excited there was going to be a baby in the house for me to help care for—I couldn't wait!

By the time our baby brother arrived, I had turned 13 and our older brother 17. I immediately became Jason's second mama. My parents even gave me the privilege of naming him. I loved taking care of my baby brother. Little did I realize then just how much what I learned would help me with my own babies many years later.

We grew up on a farm in Kentucky with wonderful parents who provided everything we needed. With a deep Christian faith, they taught us to have a strong work

ethic, to love each other, and to serve those in our community.

Farm life meant we lived close to the land and to each other. Every summer, we grew a massive garden with tomatoes, beans, corn, and more. One of my regular chores was gathering vegetables with Mom and helping her can them for the winter months. A memory I cherish of our dad was how he loved to grow upwards of 100 tomato plants, not just for us to keep, but to give away to family and neighbors.

One time he asked me if I'd ride into town with him to visit someone. We arrived at a small house, and before going to the door, he reached into the back of the pickup to grab several tomato plants. The woman who lived there invited us in. Dad didn't just drop off the plants—he walked through her back door to her small garden and planted them for her. I was so proud he was my dad. That was a lesson in serving others that has stayed with me through the years.

We also had a cow, and it was my job to milk her every morning and evening. In addition to our milk cow, we raised our own beef cattle, and Dad would process the meat himself. Looking back, our meals were incredibly

fresh and nourishing. Mom was a wonderful cook, and though we didn't think much of it at the time, we were eating far healthier than many families do today.

Jason has always been fun loving and determined. I'll never forget the time one of our hens hatched a batch of baby chicks and six-year-old Jason decided he absolutely had to hold one. He pulled on Dad's tall rubber boots, which practically swallowed his legs, and marched straight into the barn like a tiny farmer on a mission. The mother hen was not amused. She fussed and flogged, but Jason did not give up. In those floppy boots, he chased one of the chicks with full determination and eventually scooped it up. He sat down, smiling, and gently cuddled the chick for a few minutes before returning it to its very frenzied mother. The vet happened to be there that day treating one of our cows, and he got such a kick out of the whole scene that he retold the story for years, always with laughter.

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# The Price of Processed Food

A few years after Jason was born in 1974, processed foods started making its way into our home. Like many families at the time, we gradually traded nutrition for convenience without realizing the long-term consequences. None of us could have guessed how much this shift would affect Jason. As the youngest—and, yes, a bit spoiled—Jason was often allowed to eat whatever he wanted, which meant a lot of sugar and very little restraint. We didn't know it then, but those early habits laid the foundation for serious health issues later in his life.

Then, in 1994, when Jason was just 21, another life-altering event occurred. Our beloved dad was killed in a tragic truck accident. The shock and loss devastated our entire family, and it hit Jason hard, especially since he

was still living at home with our parents. He slipped into what we now recognize as a quiet, hidden

depression. Unaddressed grief left him with little concern for his own health. Sadly, his poor eating habits continued as a means of coping.

By his early 30s, he was diagnosed with high blood pressure. Unfortunately, it went unchecked for many years. Looking back, he recalls his kidneys hurting in the middle of the night, and by his late 40s, he was diagnosed with stage three chronic kidney disease (CKD). Within months of that diagnosis, it progressed to stage five CKD.

At age 48, Jason went to the emergency room for dialysis and came dangerously close to losing his life. That crisis marked the beginning of a long road that included nearly two years of dialysis.

He started on hemodialysis, then transitioned to peritoneal (home) dialysis, and eventually returned to hemodialysis. As a big guy, peritoneal dialysis was a tough fit for Jason. He had to be connected to the machine for 10 to 11 hours every night, and the alarms blared often, forcing him to get up and stand so the fluid could drain properly. This happened three to four times a night, leaving him constantly sleep deprived. Still, he got up

every morning and went to work, pushing through exhaustion and doing his best to live a normal life.

Looking back, it's clear how deeply those early childhood habits and untreated conditions shaped Jason's future. The combination of eating processed food, unchecked high blood pressure, and unmanaged diabetes quietly damaged his kidneys over time. None of it happened overnight. It was slow, silent, and easy to miss—until it wasn't. We had no idea how much strain those choices were putting on his body until the damage was already done.

One time, Jason told me he wished every person would have to experience dialysis for just one week. He believed it would motivate people to completely rethink their eating habits and lifestyle. That stayed with me. It's a reminder I carry now: Small, everyday choices absolutely matter.

Perhaps the hardest part of all was seeing how the illness began to steal not only Jason's health, but also his spirit. He and his wife Candice were raising two little girls, and though he loved them deeply, he no longer had the energy to be fully present. A few months before the transplant, Candice shared with me how much he

had changed. The man who once filled the room with laughter and playful teasing had grown quiet. He rarely smiled, and joy seemed to have slipped away. He was so sick from dialysis, so worn down from years of chronic illness, that it felt like we were slowly losing him. It broke my heart, especially knowing how much he still had to live for.

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## The Beginning of Renewal

**W**e had all known for a while that Jason's kidneys were failing, but it wasn't until the doctors said the word *transplant* that everything shifted. From the moment I first heard it, something settled deep in my heart. I just knew I was meant to be the donor, and there was a quiet peace that stayed with me. It wasn't about being brave or selfless; I truly believe God had placed that decision in me.

But even with the assurance that God was with us, there were still moments when fear crept in. The reality of surgery, the impact on my own family, and the weight of the decision sometimes felt heavy. Yet peace always found its way back, reminding me that I wasn't walking this path alone.

So, I started the process. I went through the initial tests and found out I was a match. I felt grateful, humbled,

and honestly not surprised. It was just confirmation of what I already believed to be true. But then something unexpected happened.

Several weeks after learning I was a match, I made another decision. I chose to withdraw from being the donor. At the time, Jason was still not taking his health seriously. He was not even active on the transplant list yet because he needed to lose over forty pounds. It hurt me deeply to withdraw, but I could not move forward unless I believed he was truly going to take care of my kidney. I didn't tell him the real reason. Instead, I told him I was worried about my own health and family. Looking back, I regret not being honest with him, but maybe it was the very thing that pushed him to make a change.

In the months that followed, Jason finally began taking his health seriously by eating better and losing weight. He finally became active on the transplant list. Then, a close friend of Jason's stepped forward and offered to be tested, too. He was younger, healthy, and quickly found to be a match as well. Everyone was thrilled. He moved through each part of the evaluation without any issues. It looked like he might actually be the one to donate, and I was okay with that. The goal was to save Jason's

life. Whether it was my kidney or someone else's didn't matter. At least, that's what I thought.

Then came the day of the final test for Jason's friend—a CT scan. That morning, I was brushing my teeth when I suddenly felt the Holy Spirit speak to my heart. It was not audible, but it was unmistakably clear. The words were simple: "This is for *you* to do." I froze in place, toothbrush in hand, and stood still for a moment. It was not dramatic or emotional. It was peaceful and certain. I will never forget that moment. God's voice isn't audible, but when He speaks, you know. And I knew. No matter what the test showed, this journey had always been mine to take.

Next came the corroboration of the Holy Spirit's voice. Later that same day, Jason called me in tears. The CT scan had revealed some shocking news—his friend had only one kidney. He would not be able to donate after all. Jason was devastated. I listened as he cried. When he paused, I said, "I'm so sorry for your friend, but Jason, I've always known. It's me and you. This is our journey to walk together."

In that moment, everything became clear. The transplant was not just a medical decision. It was a calling.

God had written this part of our story long before we ever reached it. From that point forward, I moved ahead with purpose. I began preparing my body for surgery with more intentionality. I walked daily, stayed active, and did everything I could to be healthy and strong. The kidney I planned to give him needed to be in tip-top shape. We were finally moving toward something better. After so many years of decline, exhaustion, and uncertainty, hope had entered the picture. And hope changes everything.

Before we could move forward with the transplant, I had to go through an extensive evaluation process to make sure I was healthy enough to be a donor. It began with several routine screenings—a colonoscopy, a mammogram, and a pap smear—to ensure I had no underlying health conditions, especially cancer. Once I had cleared those screenings, I spent a full day at the University of Kentucky Medical Center undergoing a battery of tests. These included comprehensive bloodwork, urinalysis, and a detailed CT scan to assess the condition of my kidneys. I was also scheduled for meetings with a social worker, a nephrologist, and nurse coordinator.

A few days later, my nurse coordinator called with news that caught us off guard. The scan had shown that one of

my kidneys was about 20% smaller than the other. I was told that it's fairly common for kidneys to differ slightly in size—usually about 10 to 15%—but a 20% difference was significant. Jason and I were both concerned, but deep down, I trusted that God had everything under control. The transplant team explained they never remove a donor's larger kidney, so they needed to make sure the smaller one would be big enough to support Jason, my big little brother.

To get a more precise measurement, they ordered a nuclear renal scan, which required me to return to the hospital for another round of testing. I was injected with a small amount of radioactive tracer, then sent away for a couple of hours before returning for imaging. My husband came with me that day, and after the wait, we returned for the scan. The new scan showed that my kidneys were actually very close in size. The one the transplant team would take for donation (which I had already affectionately named Judy) was only about 2% smaller than the other. We were overjoyed and so grateful. It felt like another clear sign that God had gone before us in this process.

With that final piece of testing complete, I was officially cleared as Jason's donor. I cried tears of relief and grati-

tude, knowing how much this would mean for him, his family, and our 86-year-old mother.

Yes, I named my kidney. It just felt right to give her a little personality since she was about to go on a big adventure. Judy became a sort of mascot for the journey, bringing levity to balance the seriousness of what we were walking through. Preparing for surgery brought its own challenges, but the biggest shift had already happened. Hope had entered the picture. For the first time in a long time, we weren't just surviving. We were moving toward something better. As I walked forward in faith, there was a quiet strength that carried me. I wasn't doing this alone. The peace I felt wasn't mine to generate; it was given. And I kept thinking of one particular verse that had stayed with me through the process: "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friend" (John 15:13).

I wasn't giving my life for Jason, but I was giving a part of myself. And I was doing it for someone I had loved since the moment I first laid eyes on him in the hospital nursery. This was what love looked like in real life. And it was a privilege to say yes. Another verse also echoed in my heart during that season: "So whoever knows the right thing to do and does not do it, for him it is sin" (James

4:17). I knew what the right thing was. There was no hesitation in me now. God had made the path clear, and I intended to walk it in faith and gratitude.



## **Donor Readiness Tips: What to Expect and How to Prepare**

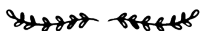
If you're considering becoming a living kidney donor, the evaluation process is thorough, and that's a good thing. The goal is to protect your health while ensuring the recipient has the best possible chance of a successful transplant. Here are a few insights from what I've learned through my own journey that might help you prepare.

- **Expect a full medical work-up.** Before surgery can be scheduled, you'll go through a comprehensive screening that typically includes bloodwork, urine tests, blood pressure checks, imaging scans, and screenings for cancer (such as a colonoscopy, mammogram, or pap smear). These tests help doctors make sure your overall health is strong enough for donation.

- **Prepare for a full-day evaluation.** Most transplant centers require a dedicated day for in-depth testing. This can include meeting with a nephrologist, a social worker, and a nurse coordinator, as well as undergoing imaging (like CT or nuclear scans) to assess kidney size and function.
- **Understand that size and function matter.** It's common for kidneys to differ slightly in size, but if there's a significant difference, your transplant team will conduct additional tests. They need to make sure the kidney you're donating is strong enough to support your recipient's needs.
- **Lifestyle choices make a difference.** It's important to stay active, drink plenty of water, eat a balanced diet, and avoid smoking or excessive alcohol leading up to surgery. The healthier you are, the faster your recovery and the better the outcome for both you and your recipient.
- **Emotional readiness matters too.** The testing process isn't just physical, it's also emotional. Expect conversations about the risks, poten-

tial outcomes, and how donation might affect your life. This is an important part of preparing your heart as well as your body.

- **Trust the process and your instincts.** There will be moments of uncertainty, but pray and trust God, your medical team, and yourself. If donation feels like the right decision, every test is simply another step toward changing someone's life.



## **Recipient Readiness Tips: Preparing for a New Beginning**

Receiving a kidney transplant is more than just a medical procedure, it's a second chance at life. But the journey requires preparation, commitment, and intentional choices both before and after surgery. Here are a few key lessons from Jason's experience that might help you or a loved one get ready:

- **Focus on your overall health early.** Transplant teams want to see that you're committed

to living a healthy life before they place you on the active waiting list. That means managing weight, controlling blood pressure, and stabilizing blood sugar if you have diabetes. Jason had to lose more than forty pounds before he could even be considered active on the transplant list, and that work paid off in his recovery.

- **Lifestyle changes aren't optional, they're required.** Diet, exercise, hydration, and lifestyle all play major roles in how well a transplanted kidney will function. Building good habits before surgery makes it easier to sustain them afterward. Jason learned that even small daily changes, like choosing whole foods over processed ones and being active, had a huge impact.
- **Stay engaged in your care.** Being an informed, proactive patient matters. Ask questions, follow up on lab results, and keep track of your medications. After the transplant, Jason returned to the hospital twice a week for a month for bloodwork and adjustments to his anti-rejection medications. This hands-on involvement was key to keeping Judy healthy.

- **Expect an emotional journey.** It's common for transplant recipients to feel a mix of gratitude, guilt, hope, and fear. Jason often shared how overwhelming it was to receive such a gift, but also how it motivated him to protect and honor that gift every day. Talking with a counselor, pastor, or support group can help you process those feelings.
- **Remember, recovery takes time.** Healing doesn't happen overnight. Jason experienced some complications and spent two weeks in the hospital after surgery, and it took months for the doctors to fully balance his blood pressure and anti-rejection medications and for his incision to heal. But with patience and perseverance, each week brought noticeable progress. Each small victory is worth celebrating.
- **Protect your kidney with lifelong habits.** Your new kidney is a partner for life, and it needs your care. Stay hydrated and active, stick with eating whole foods, manage stress, keep up with regular checkups, and follow your care team's advice. In many ways, your kidney becomes "the boss"—and appropriately so. Pay-

ing attention to what it needs and responding with healthy choices will help it thrive and keep you feeling your best for years to come.

## A Day We'll Never Forget

The morning of the transplant was filled with both nerves and gratitude. Jason and Candice, along with my husband, Steve, our daughter, and our son-in-law, all stayed together at a hotel in Lexington near the University of Kentucky Medical Center so we'd be close by. We were due to report by 5 a.m., so we gathered in the hotel lobby early, snapped a few photos to mark the occasion, and tried to soak in the moment. Jason was feeling sick, which had become his “normal,” and neither of us had slept much the night before. But we were ready. It was time.

At the hospital, things moved quickly. We hugged our families, said our goodbyes, and were escorted to separate prep areas. I would go into surgery first, and about halfway through, Jason would be brought into a nearby

operating room to receive Judy. We were told the surgeries would each take about three to four hours.

In the prep room, I changed into a hospital gown while a young nurse started an IV in my hand. My anesthesiologist came in to review the plan for general anesthesia and explained I would remain awake until we were in the operating room. My husband was able to stay with me, which was comforting, and less than an hour later, it was time.

The operating room was bright and filled with high-tech equipment, just what I expected, especially since I was scheduled for a robotic nephrectomy in the removal of my left kidney. I hadn't even known that word before Jason's transplant journey. My surgeon explained beforehand that I would be positioned on my right side so gravity could assist in the surgery. They would make three small incisions for the robotic instruments and one horizontal incision a few inches below my belly button, just above my old C-section scar. He also explained they'd fill my abdomen with carbon dioxide gas during the procedure to create space and visibility, which sometimes causes shoulder pain afterward as the air works its way out. But not all patients experience the pain, and I hoped I would be one of them.

Before I drifted off, I reminded my surgeon, “Don’t forget to take a picture of Judy.” He smiled and said, “Everyone in here knows about the picture of Judy—we won’t forget.” That’s the last thing I remember before anesthesia took over.

While I was in surgery, the nurse in the operating room texted updates to my husband and daughter. Everything was going smoothly, but as the hours stretched on and the messages stopped for a bit, they grew worried. It was nearing the four-hour mark when they finally received word that the surgery had gone well and I was in recovery.

Waking up from anesthesia was harder than I expected. I wasn’t in pain, but keeping my eyes open to stay awake felt like a battle. My husband was the first to visit, followed by my daughters, and then my nieces. Only one visitor was allowed at a time. Jason was in his own recovery room after a four-hour surgery as well, though he had a harder time waking up and was more uncomfortable.

I learned something new that day: recipients keep their own kidneys, even when they’re no longer functioning. Jason’s kidneys were still there, though functioning at

only 2.5%. Judy was placed inside his lower abdomen and connected directly to his bladder.

After an hour or so in recovery, I was taken to my room. I wasn't experiencing any pain or soreness yet, likely because the anesthesia was still in effect. That evening, the nurses offered me pain medication, but I chose not to take it. As the feeling in my abdomen returned, I realized I was sore, not in pain, and there is a difference. For the soreness, I took Tylenol (acetaminophen), which was all I needed.

Before the transplant, several close friends had shared their own surgical experiences with me, especially how prescription pain medications led to severe constipation. They told me it was so uncomfortable they would try to avoid those medications in the future. That stayed with me. I also wanted to avoid any potential dependency, so for me, declining the pain medication was the right choice.

By the evening after surgery, I wanted to get up and go see Jason. The nurses brought me a walker, and even though I was sore and stiff, I shuffled down the hall to his room. The moment we saw each other, we both cried. Candice took pictures of us together, celebrating the end

of a long and painful chapter. “We did it,” I told him. “In a month, we’ll look back and say, ‘Can you believe that was a month ago?’”

The next morning, my husband returned, and I asked him to walk with me down the hall. I knew from past surgeries how important it was to move early, even if it hurt. Movement speeds healing, and I was surprised none of the other transplant patients were walking. If only they knew how much it helps.

The day after surgery, I developed intense shoulder pain, just as my surgeon had warned. It was caused by the gas used during surgery, and while nothing could ease it, I knew it would pass. Again, I chose not to take pain medication but opted for Tylenol which was sufficient. By the second day, it had mostly dissipated. The nurses were amazed by how quickly I was recovering. Most donors stay two nights, but I was cleared to go home after just one, part of the 2% who do. When I was walking the hall the morning after the transplant, one nurse commented, “She doesn’t even look like a patient.” Still, I chose to stay an extra night at the hospital, both to be near Jason and because the adjustable hospital bed was more comfortable for the shoulder pain.

I went home on my birthday, just two days after surgery. It was hard to leave Jason behind, but I was so grateful to be heading home. We even stopped for lunch at one of my favorite restaurants on the way. I felt well enough that I chose not to take any prescription pain medication home with me. The soreness was manageable with Tylenol, and I didn't feel I needed anything stronger.

Jason's recovery was more complicated. His blood pressure was unstable, and about three inches of his incision wasn't healing properly and had to be packed daily. He stayed in the hospital for two weeks. The doctors told us it would take about three months to get his anti-rejection and blood pressure medications properly balanced. Through it all, Candice never left his side.

We talked constantly, often multiple times a day. Jason told me he was finally sleeping again, something he hadn't done much of during the two grueling years on dialysis. Once home, he continued returning to the hospital twice a week for a month for lab work and medication adjustments. Slowly but surely, he was improving.

And of course, Judy wasted no time proving herself. "Judy's a rock star!" Jason told me one day. "I haven't been able to pee this much for over two years!" That was

music to my ears—a sign that Judy was doing exactly what she was meant to do.

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## Judy's Big Move

**F**rom the moment Judy was placed into Jason, she made her presence known. She peed right there on the operating table. Jason's surgeon said that was rare and a very good sign. Judy came ready to clock in and start her work!

I had requested robotic surgery, and I was so thankful the University of Kentucky transplant team was able to make it happen. Their skill and kindness throughout the entire process gave me confidence. They told me I would have three small incisions for the robotic instruments and one slightly larger one below my belly button, where Judy would be "extracted." After surgery, I noticed that the larger incision was, well, a bit larger than expected. The next day, I found out why.

Jason's surgeon explained that when a female donates to a male recipient, especially a bigger guy like Jason,

there's sometimes concern whether the kidney will be large enough to support the recipient. But not this time. Jason's surgeon told him, "She's a big 'un and perfect for you." They had to make the incision larger just to get her out. Judy had size, strength, and, apparently, perfect performance potential!

Just before surgery, I asked my surgeon if he would take a picture of Judy for me. He laughed and said, "No problem." The next day, I received those pictures. When I texted them to Jason, he replied, "She's beautiful!" And she really was.

Honestly, Judy was more than just a kidney. She took on a full-blown personality. So naturally, I wrote her a theme song (with a little help from AI). The lyrics still make us laugh, and they capture Judy's vibe perfectly:

### **Judy Kidney's Pee Pot Ballad**

*You got a kidney, her name is Judy.  
She's not shy, and she's not moody.  
She's moving in and taking her spot,  
Right by your bladder—she's a pee pot.*

*Judy Kidney, your brand-new friend,  
She'll have you peeing again and again.  
Midnight, sunrise, every snack,  
She's tapping your bladder like, "Get up, Jack!"*

*Don't give her soda; don't feed her fries.  
She'll puff right up and dramatize.  
Water's her love and naps are a joke,  
'Cause she's got you waking up mid-soak.*

*Judy Kidney, she rules your stream.  
The queen of pee and midnight dreams.  
Treat her nice and don't make her mad,  
Or you'll find out why her Yelp reviews are bad!*

*Take care of Judy, Jason—she's not just a kidney, she's the boss now!*

She really is. From day one, Judy came in like a boss, and we've been laughing about it ever since. Not everyone names their organ, and definitely not everyone writes a theme song about it, but not everyone gets a kidney like Judy. And let's face it, not everyone gets a brother like Jason, either.

As I lay in my hospital bed the night after the surgery, I thought about how God had given us a miracle. Judy

had done her job, and Jason had a second chance. What a gift it was to play a part in that.

Jason wasn't exaggerating. Just five months after the transplant, Judy had raised his kidney function to 65%—an incredible turnaround for someone who, only a year earlier, had been so sick and exhausted that he was beginning to lose hope of ever feeling well or having a good quality of life again.

Before the transplant, my own kidney function was 96%. The day I left the hospital, it was 60. My nurse coordinator assured me this was completely normal for someone my age with two kidneys. He explained that my body would gradually adapt as my remaining kidney increased its capacity, and my function would likely rise to around 70% over time. Knowing that both Judy and I were thriving was deeply reassuring. Jason still calls her a rock star, and I agree!

**“The Lord has done great things for us,  
and we are filled with joy.” Psalm 126:3**

# 6

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## Five Months Later

### Life After the Transplant

**I**t's been five months since transplant day, and what a difference those months have made. Looking back, it's hard to believe how far we've come. There were long days, uncertain moments, and plenty of prayers along the way, but today Jason and I are both thriving in ways that once felt impossible.

**Jason's New Lease on Life.** Jason is doing amazingly well. There are no signs of rejection, and his doctors are thrilled with how Judy is functioning. He still goes in for regular lab work and follow-ups, and they continue to fine-tune his medications. But the transformation in his health is simply amazing! Jason often says, "Most days, I feel like I'm 20 again!"—and it shows. His energy is back, his joy has returned, and he's back at work (though he's wisely taking it easy as his body continues to heal).

His incision has healed beautifully, and he's made lasting changes to protect his health.

Jason is committed to eating clean, whole foods, avoiding fast food, and staying active and hydrated. He and I both invested in water filtration systems that remove chemicals, heavy metals, and fluoride from our drinking water—a choice we made after learning more about the long-term effects of those substances on the body. Now, filtered water is part of our daily routine, and we both drink plenty of it.

But beyond the physical changes, the emotional transformation is perhaps the most profound. The man who once struggled to stay awake or find joy is now laughing again. He's present with his family, active with his daughters, and deeply grateful for this second chance at life. Seeing my brother not just surviving but truly living again has been one of the greatest blessings of my life.

**Life as a Donor and Sister.** As for me, I feel wonderful. I walk every day, stay active, and make hydration a top priority. Physically, I feel completely normal—so much so that I often say to my husband, “Did we really have a transplant? Did we really do that?” It almost feels surreal, but it's a daily reminder of God's faithfulness and the

wonder of His design. The human body reflects God's faithfulness in the most miraculous ways—a living reminder that “we are fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14).

I have no restrictions now, other than the fact that I can never take ibuprofen, since research shows it can harm kidney function. I have no lingering side effects, and my life feels just as full—maybe even fuller—than before. Knowing that I was able to play a role in giving Jason his life back is something I thank God for every single day.

## Takeaways for Future Donors and Recipients

- **Walk early and often.** Getting up the evening of surgery or the next morning helps with healing, circulation, and bowel function. It's not comfortable at first, but it does speed up healing and recovery.
- **Consider pain management options.** After donor surgery, I chose not to take prescription pain medication because I was sore but not in real pain. Tylenol was enough for me, and I preferred to avoid the side effects I had heard about from friends, including severe constipation and the possibility of dependency. Your experience may be different, but talk with your transplant team about your options and concerns, and what will work best for you.

- **Hydrate well and choose your water.** Jason and I both use water filters that remove chemicals, metals, and fluoride. I have researched fluoride's potential side effects and strongly prefer to filter it out. Staying hydrated is one of the simplest ways to support health after transplant.
- **Eat clean.** Focusing on eating whole foods such as lean proteins, vegetables, and fruit, Jason and I also strive to limit sugar and avoid processed food. Also, based on my research, seed oils are highly processed and can contribute to inflammation and other long-term health problems. Instead, we opt for avocado, olive, and coconut oils for their health benefits. Jason's experience reminds us the choices we make every day, even the oils we cook with, truly matter.
- **Expect the medication dance.** Recipients often need several months to balance anti-rejection and blood pressure medications. Numbers may bounce around. This is normal and temporary.
- **Know the normal aches.** Donors may feel

shoulder pain from surgical gas for a day or two. It passes as the gas dissipates. There is also soreness from the incisions, and while it can be very uncomfortable, moving speeds healing and recovery.

- **Ask for photos and explanations.** Request a photo of the donated kidney if that will encourage you. Ask your transplant team to explain surgery positions, incisions, and what to expect in recovery and the days and weeks following.
- **Lean on your people.** Let family and friends help. Simple texts, short visits, and the power of prayer make a real difference.
- **Remember the goal.** Surgery is one day. Recovery is a season. The destination is life restored.

## Author's Note

### A Final Reflection on the Journey

Looking back on this journey, it is impossible not to see it as something larger than a medical procedure. It was a deeply human experience, one that touched every layer of our lives and revealed truths about love, sacrifice, faith, and the bonds that shape us. At its core, this was not only a story about a kidney transplant. It was a story about what it means to be human.

Phenomenology is the study of lived experience, how we make sense of the world as we live it. And that is precisely what this journey became: an unfolding experience that taught me not just about medicine or anatomy, but about what it means to give, to receive, and to trust. Through every moment, from the first mention of “transplant” to the day I walked into Jason’s hospital room after surgery, I learned the most profound expe-

periences are often those that ask us to give of ourselves without guarantee of the outcome.

There is something deeply sacred in offering a part of oneself so that another person can have more life. It is a love that transforms rather than trades. The gift of a kidney became far more than a medical procedure. It became time—time for Jason to wake up to new mornings with his daughters, to share laughter with his wife, and to feel strength return to his body. It offered the chance to reclaim the everyday moments that illness had slowly taken away. And in giving that gift, what I experienced was just as profound: the joy of watching a brother live fully, the peace that comes from following God's call, and the unshakable knowledge that love, when lived out, can change two lives at once.

This experience also taught me that we do not walk these paths alone. Faith carried me when fear tried to settle in. Our beautiful family and friends surrounded us with strength when uncertainty loomed. And love, steady and unconditional, guided every decision, every conversation, and every prayer. Even Judy, our now-famous kidney, became a symbol of resilience and humor, a reminder that even in serious moments, joy still finds its way in.

Most of all, this journey showed me that life is precious and fragile, yet incredibly strong when nurtured with care. It reminded me that health is a gift not to be taken for granted, and that the choices we make—what we eat, how we live, and how we love—shape not just our days, but our destiny.

When I think about the journey now, I am overwhelmed with gratitude. We walked with faith through fear and uncertainty and came out the other side with hope, healing, and a story worth telling. And if there is one thing I hope this story offers you, it is this: that love is powerful, that faith is sufficient, and that giving of ourselves, in whatever way we are called, has the power to change lives—including our own.

This journey will stretch you, strengthen you, and bless you in ways you can't imagine. Whether you're taking your first step toward transplant or celebrating a new beginning on the other side, remember: every story is different, but you never walk alone. Help, hope, and healing are always within reach, and so is a new chapter full of life.

***To God be the glory for great things He has done!***

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## A Word of Encouragement

If you're not taking care of yourself through healthy habits—eating whole foods, avoiding sugar and processed foods, staying active, maintaining a healthy weight, and drinking plenty of water—start today. It's never too late to make changes that can prevent or manage chronic kidney disease (CKD) and help you avoid dialysis. Watching Jason deteriorate during those years on dialysis was heartbreaking, and I wouldn't wish that on anyone. Take care of the body God gave you. Stay hydrated, keep moving, and nourish yourself with real foods. Small choices made every day truly matter.

Not long after the transplant, an acquaintance shared that she knew a family with eleven siblings, and one of them needed a kidney transplant. To everyone's shock, not a single brother or sister matched, but a niece did. She became the donor who saved his life.

I remembered my nurse coordinator telling me that siblings are not always a match, but hearing that story made it real. It gave me an even deeper appreciation for the gift God allowed Jason and me to share. Never assume the match will be obvious. Hope has a way of coming from unexpected places.

## Resources

### Support for Every Step of the Journey

**W**hether you're preparing to become a living donor, waiting for a transplant, or supporting a loved one through the process, you are not alone. There are incredible resources, communities, and tools available to guide, educate, and encourage you along the way. Here are some of the most helpful starting points.

#### **For Living Donors**

**National Living Donor Assistance:** NLDA's mission is to reduce the financial disincentives to living organ donation through operating a nationwide system that provides reimbursement for travel and subsistence expenses, lost wages, and dependent care expenses to people being evaluated for and/or undergoing living organ donation. [www.livingdonorassistance.org](http://www.livingdonorassistance.org)

**Donate Life Kentucky:** Donate Life Kentucky is a statewide nonprofit dedicated to saving and healing lives through organ, eye, and tissue donation by growing the Kentucky Donor Registry, supporting donor families and transplant patients, and educating communities. Phone: (502) 694-3015 – [www.donatelifeky.org](http://www.donatelifeky.org)

**United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS):**

UNOS is a national organization that manages the U.S. transplant system. Their site provides detailed information on the donation process, from evaluation to recovery, as well as stories from other donors. [www.unos.org/resources/patient/](http://www.unos.org/resources/patient/)

**National Kidney Foundation—Living Donation:** A comprehensive guide to living kidney donation, including health considerations, financial questions, and support resources before and after surgery. [www.kidney.org/kidney-topics/becoming-living-donor](http://www.kidney.org/kidney-topics/becoming-living-donor)

**American Society of Transplantation—Living**

**Donor Toolkit:** A practical collection of FAQs, checklists, and patient stories written by medical professionals and transplant recipients. [www.healthytransplant.com/living-donor-toolkit](http://www.healthytransplant.com/living-donor-toolkit)

## **For Kidney Recipients**

**University of Kentucky Transplant Center:** Specializes in the care of patients with advanced, end-stage organ disease. performing more than 200 transplant procedures each year, including kidney, lung, liver, heart and pancreas transplants, and kidney and lung transplants for children. [www.ukhealthcare.uky.edu/transplant-center](http://www.ukhealthcare.uky.edu/transplant-center)

**National Kidney Foundation—Transplant Guide:** Step-by-step information on preparing for a transplant, what to expect during surgery, and how to thrive afterward. [www.nkfm.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Kidney-Transplant-Guide-FINAL.pdf](http://www.nkfm.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Kidney-Transplant-Guide-FINAL.pdf)

**National Kidney Registry:** Provides tools to help find a living donor. [www.kidneyregistry.com](http://www.kidneyregistry.com)

**American Association of Kidney Patients: (AAKP):** One of the oldest kidney patient advocacy groups, offering educational materials, webinars, and patient-led support groups. [www.aakp.org](http://www.aakp.org)

## **Faith-Based Encouragement**

*“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”*  
(Philippians 4:13).

*“The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in Him, and He helps me”* (Psalm 28:7).

*“For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord . . . ‘plans to give you hope and a future’”* (Jeremiah 29:11).

*“I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well”* (Psalm 139:14).

## **Nutrition & Lifestyle Resources**

**Kidney Foundation Nutrition & Diet:** Meal planning guides, tips for protecting kidney health, and information on sodium, protein, and hydration. [www.kidney.org/nutrition](http://www.kidney.org/nutrition)

**Environmental Working Group: Tap Water Database:** Learn what’s in your water. Search your city’s water quality and learn

about filtration options that remove chemicals, metals, and fluoride—something Jason and I both now prioritize. [www.ewg.org/tapwater](http://www.ewg.org/tapwater)

**The Water Machine:** All glass, affordable, water purifying system. Jason and I both filter our water to remove chemicals, metals, and fluoride. I love my Water Machine. [www.thewatermachine.com](http://www.thewatermachine.com)

## Support Communities

**Kidney Donor Conversations:** A Facebook group where living donors share stories, questions, and encouragement.

**Transplant Recipients Support Group:** Online and local groups offered through hospitals and nonprofits that connect recipients and families walking the same path.

**Caregiver Resources:** Many transplant centers offer support groups and counseling for caregivers and family members.

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## Guided Reflection Journal

*Use these prompts to explore your feelings, needs, and questions as you consider living kidney donation. Take your time. This is your space to reflect honestly and openly.*

- **Why am I considering donation?** What is motivating me to explore this path?
- **How do I feel about this decision right now?** What emotions am I experiencing — hopeful, nervous, curious, uncertain, inspired?
- **What research have I done so far about living donation, and what have I learned from it?**
- **What questions or concerns do I have?**
- **What support do I have in this process?**

Who can I talk to openly — family, friends, pastor, healthcare professionals?

- **How do I care for my physical and emotional well-being during this process?** What habits, routines, or resources support me?
- **What values are guiding my decision?** Which personal beliefs or life experiences shape my perspective?
- **What would help me feel confident moving forward or stepping back?** Information, conversations, medical advice, emotional support, time, clarity?
- **How might this decision impact my daily life now and after recovery?** Time, work, responsibilities, health, lifestyle?
- **How do I typically respond to soreness vs. pain?** How might potential side effects such as constipation or dependency shape my preferences for pain management?

**Personal notes:** Thoughts, reflections, reminders to myself.

## Questions to Ask Your Transplant Team

*These questions are designed to help you feel informed, supported, and confident as you explore living kidney donation. Bring them to appointments or keep them in your journal or notes app, and add your own as you go.*

### **Evaluation & Testing**

- What tests will I need as a potential donor?
- How long does the donor evaluation process usually take?
- What criteria are used to determine if I am eligible to donate?
- Will all tests be covered by insurance?

## **Surgical Details**

- Who will perform the surgery?
- How is the surgery done?
- How long will I be in the hospital?
- What anesthesia will be used?
- What are the medical risks to me as a donor?

## **Recovery**

- What is the typical recovery timeline for donors?
- What side effects should I be aware of with pain medications commonly used after donor surgery?
- If I prefer to avoid prescription pain medication, what alternatives are available and safe for donors?
- When can I return to work, driving, exercise, and lifting?
- Will I need help at home after surgery?

- What should I expect physically and emotionally after donation?

### **Follow-Up & Long-Term Health**

- How often will I need follow-up appointments?
- What lifestyle changes, if any, are recommended after donation?
- How will donating affect my long-term health?
- Are there any medications, foods, or activities I should avoid long-term?
- What are signs that I should contact a doctor post-donation?

### **Financial & Practical Questions**

- Will the recipient's insurance cover my medical expenses?
- Are there costs I may personally incur (travel, lost wages, childcare, etc.)?
- Are reimbursement programs or grants available for donors?

- Will donating affect my health insurance or life insurance in the future?

### **Emotional & Spiritual Support**

- What emotional support resources are available for donors?
- Can I speak with someone who has donated before?
- Do you offer transplant support groups?
- Are chaplain or spiritual care services available?

### **Recipient Care (Optional to Ask)**

- What support will my loved one receive before and after surgery?
- What is their expected recovery timeline?
- How often will they need follow-up?

### **Space for My Additional Questions**

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# A Note to the Reader

## **A quick favor...**

If this book encouraged you in any way, I would be grateful if you left an honest review on the website where you purchased or downloaded it. Your feedback helps others discover the story and find hope for their own journey. Thank you for taking a moment to share your thoughts.

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## Meet the Author

**M**elody Rawlings is an author and educator who is passionate about service, faith, and helping others live meaningful, purpose-centered lives. She holds a doctorate in educational leadership and a master's degree in science and technology. Her writing has appeared in peer-reviewed journals and in books published by Routledge, Cambridge, IGI Global, and Kendall Hunt.

### **A Personal Note from Melody**

If this journey touched you and you'd like to share your story, I would love to hear from you. Please note that while I cannot offer medical advice, I welcome connection and shared experiences. I am available for select speaking engagements and appreciate invitations to share hope and encouragement. You can reach me at: [meremelgroup@gmail.com](mailto:meremelgroup@gmail.com). Thank you for reading, *To My Brother With Love*.

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# Acknowledgements

This journey was not walked alone. Our deepest gratitude goes first to our incredible spouses, Steve and Candice, whose love, patience, and unwavering support carried us through every step. You were our steady anchors, reminding us of God's grace in the midst of uncertainty.

To our daughters, Kaitlyn, Meredith, Olivia, and Stella, thank you for your joy, encouragement, and strength. You reminded us daily of what truly matters: faith, family, and love.

To our beloved mother, Shirley, whose prayers never ceased and whose faith never wavered, we are forever grateful. Your steadfast love and example continue to inspire us.

We also thank our extended family, our friends, and our church families for surrounding us with prayer, kindness, and encouragement. Every message sent and prayer lifted on our behalf meant more than words can express.

A special thank you to the University of Kentucky transplant team and the dedicated nurses and staff who cared for us with extraordinary compassion and skill—your expertise and humanity made all the difference in this journey of hope and healing. This story is as much yours as it is ours.