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SEPT. 11 ANNIVERSARY/FOLLOW-UP STORY IDEA

HIGHLIGHTS:

One year ago a kidney transplant scheduled for Sept. 11, 2001, from a White American Muslim to an African American Christian in a Jewish hospital didn't seem particularly remarkable. Neither did the fact that the transplant would be performed by transplant teams including German, Jewish and South African surgeons. Post 9/11, though, the ironies and significance of this transplant – combined with the date for which it was originally scheduled – are inescapable.

“WE’RE ALL ONE PEOPLE,” SAYS WHITE MUSLIM ORGAN DONOR WHO GAVE ONE OF HER KIDNEYS TO AN AFRICAN AMERICAN CHRISTIAN IN A JEWISH HOSPITAL

LOS ANGELES (Aug. 22, 2002) – One year ago a kidney transplant scheduled for Sept. 11, 2001, from a White American Muslim to an African American Christian didn't seem particularly remarkable. Neither did the fact that the transplant would be performed in a Jewish hospital by transplant teams including German, Jewish and South African surgeons. Post 9/11, though, the ironies of this transplant – combined with the date for which it was originally scheduled – are inescapable.

Even though their backgrounds couldn't be more diverse Patricia Abdullah, a White American Muslim, and Mike Jones, an African American Christian, are equally committed to the concept that “we're all one people. In the year since their transplant – which was postponed from the original Sept. 11 date due to scheduling conflicts – they have become involved in efforts to change the way that California driver's licenses indicate an individual's desire to become an organ donor, and have also participated in a triathlon to raise money and awareness for children with immune deficiency disorders.

“There's no black or white, no Christian, Muslim or Jew, and no Arab or non-Arab,” says Abdullah, who donated one of her kidneys to Jones last September. “Differences just don't mean anything; they're not valid. There are no races; there are just human beings!” she says emphatically.

Abdullah met Jones at a seminar in Feb. 2001. The two were part of a class of more than 90 students enrolled in the four-day seminar. On the first day of class, the instructor announced that in order to successfully complete the course, all students needed to attend each of the four-day sessions. However, Jones, who had end-stage kidney failure and had been on kidney dialysis for five years, explained to the instructor and the class that he would need to come a little late to one of the sessions as he had a dialysis appointment.

During the supper break that evening, Abdullah and other students in the class asked Jones about his disease and what could be done about it. Jones explained that what he really needed was a kidney transplant, but although he had been on the transplant list for several years, a suitable donor had not been found. His family members had already been tested, but none were compatible.

When the class went back into session, Abdullah shocked Jones by suggesting to the rest of the class that they make it their project to find him a kidney. The class responded enthusiastically and went into action immediately, setting up an e-mail list, contacting the kidney foundation and in general, educating themselves on the concept of living donor organ transplants.

When the four-day seminar concluded, the students moved on to an advanced 16-week course, which ended on August 2, 2001. As part of this course, the students learned how to successfully make what are sometimes considered "unreasonable requests" – requests that we all need to make of others at some point in our lives, but which we really don't want to make. During one of the in-class exercises, Abdullah startled Jones by saying to him, "Mike, I'm O-positive. Make an unreasonable request of me!"

In disbelief, Jones realized what she was saying. She was offering him one of her own kidneys.

However, insurance problems presented themselves, and Jones turned to another student in the class, Terrence Akin, Vice Present for Women's & Children's Services and Psychiatry at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. Akin was not only able to assist in smoothing out the insurance issues, but also explained to Abdullah that a highly specialized German surgeon at Cedars-Sinai, Gerhard Fuchs, M.D., would be able to remove her kidney laparoscopically through a tiny port rather than through the usual large, open procedure. Thus, instead of requiring weeks or even months of recovery time, she would be able to go back to work as a writer and editor in about a week.

The surgery was scheduled for Tuesday, Sept. 11, but due to conflicting schedules of the two transplant teams, it was moved back to Sept. 25. Dr. Fuchs successfully removed Abdullah's left kidney that morning, and another Cedars-Sinai transplant surgeon, J. Louis Cohen, M.D., who is Jewish, transplanted the organ into Jones, where it began functioning immediately. Abdullah returned home two days later and Jones went home three days after that.

"This has been a profound, life-changing opportunity, and it has changed me in ways I never imagined," says Abdullah, who is a member of the Glendale Chapter of the Muslim Public Affairs Council. "I never realized I'd be able to have this view of life."

Abdullah and Jones have decided that since they now have a kidney in common that they are family in a very real sense of the word. Last year they sent out a joint Christmas card, with both families getting together for a group photo, and in Aug. 2002, both participated in a triathlon to raise awareness and funds for the Dina Lavigna Foundation. Abdullah did the 10K run, Jones pedaled the 24-mile bike ride, and four-time Olympic gold medallist in water polo, Terry Schroeder, made up the third member of their team, doing the swim portion of the triathlon.

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