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THE MORNING READ



H. LORREN AU JR., THE REGISTER

SHARING SPIRIT: Kathleen Hostert holds a shirt picturing Christy Bueno, whose organs helped save four lives.

A LIFETIME EXTENDED

By **ERIC CARPENTER**
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

FULLERTON • Each year around this time, Kathleen Hostert lives a moment that strikes her with equal parts euphoria and dread.

She stands on stage at Cal State Fullerton ready to address the mass of humanity

that gets bigger every year. She wonders: "Who are all these people? What have I done?"

When Hostert organized the county's first charity walk to raise awareness about the need for organ and tissue donation five years ago, a few

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DONOR: Cause taken up full time

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hundred people showed up.

Today, more than 2,200 are signed up to attend the fifth annual Donate Life Run/Walk.

Hostert, 44, knows just a fraction of the people who attend. But she says they are all part of her extended family.

The crowd consists of middle-aged men who have received a kidney and a second chance at life, children who are still looking for organ transplants and parents whose sons and daughters lost their lives but gave others health by donating a heart, a liver or a lung.

In that overwhelming moment, Hostert turns for support to the same, familiar person with her onstage - to her husband, Craig, who's responsible for their joining that extended family.

Nine years ago, when he needed someone to save his life, Craig Hostert turned to his wife.

MARRIAGE MATERIAL

The story of Craig and Kathleen Hostert began like so

many do, with a crush. Kathleen insists she knew immediately it was more than that.

She got a job at 17 working the cosmetics counter at Sav-On in Fullerton.

Craig was 21 - a tall, handsome veteran in the home and garden department.

"I came back to school and said, 'I met the man I'm going to marry,'" Kathleen Hostert said. "My friends just laughed at me. But I told them, 'Just watch.'"

Four years later, Craig and Kathleen were married.

Six months after they wed in 1984, Craig fell ill. His urine turned the "color of Coke," Kathleen said. A doctor found he had a rare genetic kidney disease.

He told Craig there was a 50 percent chance his kidneys would shut down within 10 years.

The couple prayed for the best and tried to move on. They had a son, Justin. Then a daughter, Nicole. But as predicted, Craig's kidneys began to fail. And on Jan. 26, 1995, he started dialysis and awaited a

transplant.

Craig's three brothers and sister tested to see if they would match.

Some of them looked promising, but a series of tests showed none was an ideal candidate.

At one of Craig's medical exams, a doctor mentioned that in rare cases spouses could be matches.

Kathleen was stunned. She wasn't even sure she had the same blood type as Craig. But when she got in the car that night, she turned to Craig and declared, "I'm going to give you a kidney."

"What?" Craig said. "No, you're not."

MATCH MADE

She was a match - as somehow she knew she would be.

On June 25, 1998, the couple sent the kids to Seattle to stay with relatives. They reassured each other with a kiss, then headed into separate operating rooms.

They were the first kidney transplant from spouse to spouse at Orange's St. Joseph Hospital.

For days, the couple lay side by side in a recovery room. Kathleen saw the color come back into Craig's face. Soon he was up walking, full of life and recovering faster than she.

"It was like we'd turned the page and started a new chapter," Kathleen said. "After years of sitting in dialysis four hours a night, three days a week, we'd left that behind. I needed to figure out what I could do to give others - the people still in dialysis - that same feeling of hope."

Kathleen, a former bank trainer and an elementary school teacher, always kept friends and family informed, mailing updates about Craig's status and information she compiled on kidney disease.

But the idea that she could do more nagged at her.

Her answer came that same year after attending a walk for kidney-disease patients near Los Angeles.



H. LORREN AU JR., THE REGISTER

ON THE MOVE: "My left kidney is in my husband's car," reads the license plate frame on Kathleen Hostert's vehicle.

"Kathleen works very hard, but it seems completely normal. She's found what she's supposed to be doing."

CRAIG HOSTERT

It was a disaster.

The course went uphill - too tiring for dialysis patients. Snacks included bananas and, well, just about every food dialysis patients aren't supposed to eat.

On the drive home, Kathleen turned to Craig and said, "We can do better than that."

STREETS FILL

Kathleen had little experience planning events beyond setting up her kids' birthday parties. But her organization skills as a teacher were well-

honed.

She persuaded former Angels shortstop David Eckstein, whose father and siblings have had kidney disease, to speak at the inaugural event.

The first walk, which emphasized the need for kidney donation, raised thousands of dollars and sparked great enthusiasm.

"People came up to me and said, 'This is great, but why not focus on the need for donating all organs?' Kathleen said.

She didn't have an immediate answer, so she did some re-

search and contacted Donate Life, an organization dedicated to getting people to sign up on a national registry of potential donors.

She found that more than 94,000 Americans need an organ transplant.

An average of 17 die each day while waiting.

A new era began for the walk. And for Kathleen.

Donate Life signed on to sponsor.

Soon after, it offered Kathleen a full-time job. She agonized over the decision, but in 2004 left her teaching job to help organize educational campaigns across Southern California.

This week she rushed around her house, stacking boxes of water and T-shirts 5 feet high in her living room, planning for today's event. The beeping of her cell phone continually interrupted her conversations.

A committee of about 30 people organizes the event. But around this time, Kathleen becomes a kind of one-woman force.

"People talk a lot these days about being purpose-driven," Craig said. "I don't know anybody more driven by a purpose than she is. She has taught me compassion."

Kathleen has always struggled with whether she's doing enough.

She's still trying to decide whether to try a second walk in Northern California.

But as she rushed around - the UPS man ringing the doorbell, a reporter asking her questions and her cell phone repeatedly buzzing - Kathleen had her answer, at least temporarily.

"Right now, I think I'm good," she said. "I'm happy this many people care."

Donate Life Run/Walk
When: 8:15 a.m. today (walk-up registration available)
Where: Cal State Fullerton, 800 N. State College Blvd.
Information: 714-526-0181 or www.donatelifeoc.org

CONTACT THE WRITER:

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