

The IndependentCOMMUNITY

'Of course, I am going to give her my kidney so she can get her life back' Go Fund Me page set up for Barrhaven woman with no health insurance or benefits who must donate a kidney to save her mother's life

BY JEFF MORRIS

We are always searching for that perfect Christmas gift to give our loved ones and family members.

For Wendy Kraft, a single mother of two adult daughters from Barrhaven, nothing could be more beautiful than the gift she is receiving from her daughter, Kielli.

"I didn't even think about it for a second," Kielli said. "My mom is sick with a disease that could be fatal. When the doctors told us she needed a kidney, it was just a reaction. Of course, I am going to give her my kidney so she can get her life back."

The Krafts are waiting for the phone call letting them know they are up next for surgery. December would be the perfect month for the transplant. It would bring poignancy to Christmas for the family, as it was at Christmas time two years ago that Wendy became very sick.

"I couldn't make it through Christmas dinner," Wendy said. "I couldn't eat. I was fatigued, and I had a raging fever. I thought I had the flu."

Two days after Christmas in 2016, Wendy's other daughter, Jill, took her mother to the emergency room at the Ottawa Civic Hospital, where it was discovered that both of Wendy's kidneys had failed. She was transferred to the kidney unit at the General, where she was diagnosed with Goodpasture Syndrome, a disease that affects one in every two million people and is almost always fatal if not quickly diagnosed. Wendy went on dialysis immediately.

Goodpasture Syndrome is a rare autoimmune disease in which antibodies attack the basement membrane in lungs and kidneys, leading to bleeding from the lungs and kidney failure. It may quickly result in permanent lung and kidney damage, often leading to death. It is treated with medications that suppress the immune system such as corticosteroids and cyclophosphamide, and with plasmapheresis, in which the antibodies are removed from the blood.

"We didn't know what this was," Kielli said. "We didn't

know the severity of it. We didn't even understand what a kidney did."

Wendy had just retired from the LCBO in Manotick three months before becoming sick. She worked for the LCBO for 24 years, mostly in Barrhaven, Kemptville and Manotick.

"When the doctor told us, I just started crying," she said. "I thought I was going to die."

For almost two years, Wendy has required daily medical attention. Jill, who lives nearby and works at the LCBO in Barrhaven in addition to having another job in the community as a real estate photographer, learned to become an at-home caregiver when she was not working. Wendy went into the hospital three times per week for dialysis. In the middle of her kidney treatments, Wendy also required a hip replacement as she could not walk.

"In just a short period of time, our mother was disintegrating in front of our eyes," Kielli said. "Everything went downhill very fast. It was scary."

While Wendy would need a transplant, her health had to improve first. She had to continue with dialysis treatments. She does dialysis for eight hours per day at home while in bed. Her spare bedroom in her townhouse has become a storage room for dialysis equipment and other medical supplies. Jill and Kielli both started the testing process to see if they were compatible donors. They worked with the Kidney Foundation of Canada Living Donor Program. Kielli decided that she would be the one to step up and donate her kidney to her mother.

"Jill was the one who stayed home with her and looked after her," Kielli said. "She put both her jobs on hold. For me, I was too scared to acknowledge what was going on instead of facing the reality that my mom was going to die. I was so scared I just wanted to avoid it, but Jill was in fight mode for her."

Kielli has gone through eight months of testing, 23 doctors appointments, as well as mandatory appointments with a psychologist to prepare her for the donation. Last

week, she met with the anesthesiologist and surgeon.

For Kielli, however, it is not as simple as donating a kidney and resuming your life as normal. She works as a lighting consultant for a lighting store, where she has no benefits, no health insurance and no sick days.

"I live paycheck to paycheck, like a lot of people do," she said. Kielli paused for a moment, and she started sobbing as she spoke about her situation.

"What am I supposed to do? Am I supposed to not donate my kidney to save my mom's life because I don't have benefits and I can't afford it?"

Kielli is taking an unpaid leave of absence from her job. Even getting time off was difficult.

"They asked me if I could wait until January when they weren't as busy," she said. "But I can't. When we get the phone call to go in, we go in. And I feel horrible putting them in a difficult position, and I feel horrible that my friends, who are my co-workers, may have to pick up extra shifts at Christmas time to accommodate me. But we have no control over the timing of this."

Wendy, meanwhile, is often overcome with guilt over the situation her daughter will be in.

"I am afraid for her," Wendy said of her daughter. "Donating an organ is not easy, and I worry that she can handle it physically."

Kielli has asthma and also had an allergic reaction to the iodine she received in a CT Scan during the testing period.

"And I worry about the cost," Wendy added. "My Great West Life plan through my retirement from the LCBO covers 90 per cent of the drugs, but there are some that aren't covered. The drugs for me will cost about \$4,000 per month. She has no coverage at all, and I don't know how she is going to be able to afford her medication and be able to pay her rent and pay her bills and survive with no income."

Wendy also paused for a moment and cried as she thought of the sacrifice her daughter was making for her.



Wendy Kraft fell ill with what she thought was the flu just three months after retiring from a 24-year career with the LCBO. She has been on dialysis for eight hours a day at home for more than a year.

Kielli will be bedridden for at least four weeks after she donates her kidney, and her recovery time is expected to be four months before she can return to work.

"She just said, 'I'm doing this.' I can't believe she would do this for me," Wendy said through a stream of tears.

Jill, meanwhile, is in the process of selling her condo in Barrhaven and is going to move in with her mother to take care of her. While Jill has been working, Wendy is usually alone at home with only her 17-year-old cat, Ziggy, to keep her company.

She is hoping that a successful transplant will bring joy back into their lives at Christmas, the time of year when Wendy's problems began two years ago.

"I'm nervous but excited," she said. "I want us to get through this and for everything to be okay. Nothing in life matters more than the people you love. I don't care about lights and trees this Christmas. I care about the two most important people in my life getting through this."

Jill has started a Go Fund Me page where people can donate to help pay for her sister's living expenses and medication while she recovers from the surgery.

Kielli, meanwhile, knows there is a big health risk for her and for her mother during their



Kielli Kraft gives her mom, Wendy, a hug. Wendy, who retired from the LCBO two years ago, has a fatal illness called Goodpasture Syndrome. Kielli is donating a kidney to her mother to help her in her fight to survive. JEFF MORRIS PHOTOS

surgeries. Her mother may not survive the surgery, but she will not survive without the surgery.

"My mom's main concern is that I can't afford to take time off work to give her a kidney while she is dying," Kielli said. "If I go into debt, I'm willing to do that. I would get a bank loan for this if I could qualify, but I can't. This is a life or death situation. We

can't even think about putting a price on saving Mom's life."

Kielli smiles as she looks at her mother.

"I'm giving you my kidney for Christmas," she said. "You're not getting any other presents from me."

If you wish to visit the Go Fund Me page to assist the Kraft family, visit www.gofundme.com/kidney-donation-transplant-help.