

Family discovers life in death

Modestan recieves kidney after slaying of second cousin

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What should have been a happy time for a Modesto family became a bittersweet moment last month.

Four years ago, doctors told Robert "Mickey" Martinez, Jr. of Modesto that his kidneys functioned at 5 percent capacity and that he would need a transplant.

He has been on the waiting list 2¼ years.

He never thought the donor would be his second cousin, nor the circumstances so sad.

Martinez, 42, received a kidney from Erik Sandoval-Preciado, 31, who died May 2 — a day after he was shot in an unincorporated neighborhood between Modesto and Ceres.

The close-knit family faces a combination of joy and grief because of Martinez's restored health and the loss of his cousin.

"He gave us a second chance for life," said Debbie Martinez, Robert's wife.

Sandoval-Preciado was shot a little after 1 a.m. on May 1, according to Stanislaus County sheriff's officials. He was taken to Doctors Medical Center in Modesto. His parents, 4-year-old daughter and nearly 50 family members gathered at the hospital.

The prognosis was not good. Sandoval-Preciado had been shot three times, once in the head.

By early the next day, a Wednesday, doctors declared Sandoval-Preciado brain dead.

And they asked about organ donation.

His mother, Julie Preciado, said it's what he would have wanted.

She called Martinez that Thursday and asked if he'd be willing to take a kidney if it matched. It could save him from the dialysis he received three times each week.

He agreed.

Doctors tested Sandoval-Preciado's blood and kidney to see whether Martinez could be a recipient. The family knew the odds were very low.

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Robert Martinez, at his Modesto home, holds a photograph of his second cousin Erik Sandoval-Preciado, who appears in the upper left of the picture. Martinez had waited more than two years for a kidney donor, and received the organ when Sandoval-Preciado died after a May 1 shooting.

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But it was a match.

"Everyone was excited," Martinez said.

Early the morning of May 5, Martinez got the call he'd been waiting for from California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco: The operation was on that day.

By 11 a.m., he and his wife and parents had made the drive to the hospital using a route they had practiced, hoping the day would come.

"I was sad for his loss, yet I was overwhelmed and full of joy that I was able to receive his kidney and that he would still be living within me," Martinez said.

Doctors were amazed at the perfect match between Sandoval-Preciado and Martinez.

For a kidney transplant, donor and recipient must have a matching blood type, matching kidney tissues and corresponding genetic markers. Also, the organ has to be roughly the same size.

"We're all still in shock," Debbie Martinez said. "It happened all like that."

The transplanted kidney kicks right in

Martinez's operation went well. Doctors told him a kidney typically takes an hour to start functioning properly after being placed in a new body, but his doctor said his transplanted kidney started functioning in two or three minutes.

"The doctors came out and said, 'We can't believe it,'" Martinez said.

Recovery typically requires a seven to 10-day stay in the hospital. But Martinez was motivated. He was out of bed after four days.

He had a funeral to attend.

Alice Martinez said her son had prayed that he could recover in time to attend Sandoval-Preciado's services May 10.

"I knew I wanted to get healthy so that I could come back to Modesto," Robert Martinez said.

Son said, 'You can't be selfish'

Family members described Sandoval-Preciado as a good man who always was smiling. He worked in the restaurant business and as an electrician.

Martinez said his cousin was well-liked and that many people attended his funeral in Modesto.

"The Catholic church was packed down there," Martinez said. "There was standing room only."

Debbie Martinez said doctors are uncertain about the cause of her husband's renal failure. It began four years ago with a full body rash, which led to a five-month quest to determine the cause of his sickness. Finally, doctors pinpointed the problem — his kidneys.

Before the surgery, Robert Martinez had to undergo three 3½-hour dialysis sessions a week. He said dialysis sapped him of strength and energy.

Today, the future feels better.

Martinez worked at an Escalon winery for 17 years before his kidney problems erupted. He wants to return.

"I'm on my way," he said. "I still go to the doctors a couple times a week trying to recover from my operation."

Martinez also wants to start traveling again. The waiting list forced him to stay within two hours of the San Francisco hospital, in case the call came for a kidney.

Now the father of six wants to take his family to Disneyland. Soon.

Preciado said she and her son had talked about being organ donors before the incident, and he told his mother she should change her negative attitude about being a donor.

"My son told me you can't be like that," she said. "You can't be selfish."

Doctors were able to recover four of Sandoval-Preciado's organs: his heart, liver and kidneys.

One of his kidneys was a direct donation to Martinez, and the other organs were given to recipients on the waiting list from Central California to Michigan.

"Hopefully, the family gets some sort of solace and comfort from knowing the decision to donate saved someone's life," said David Heneghan, public affairs director of the Transplant Network in Reno.

Heneghan said direct donations — as was the case with Martinez and Sandoval-Preciado — happen occasionally because it often helps families to donate organs and allows them to see the benefits firsthand.

'I'm honored to be his mother'

Heneghan said Martinez was lucky to have received a kidney. Martinez had said doctors told him that he could have been on the waiting list two more years if not for the direct donation.

In the United States, 96,000 people are waiting for transplants of eight different organs; 60 per cent of them need a kidney.

Debbie Martinez said many people — including many Latinos — don't know the importance of donating organs. She encourages everyone to sign up to donate.

"If you could help someone, why take (the organs) with you?" she said.

Preciado said she just received a certificate that said her son's organs saved four people's lives.

"My son wasn't a scientist," she said. "He didn't invent anything. He wasn't a fireman. But he saved four lives. I'm honored to be his mother."

The state offers two ways for people to sign up to donate, either in person at the Department of Motor Vehicles or via the Internet at www.donatelifecalifornia.org.

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