

Reg Green: A simple act can save a life

At three o'clock one recent Sunday morning somewhere northwest of Menlo Park, I was sitting in a van alone with a woman more than 40 years younger than me on a deserted road under a full moon. This is what Shakespeare had in mind when he talked of the stuff that dreams are made of and what the chief of police has other names for.

Would they have believed us, I wonder, if we'd told them that I, a 78-year-old man, was there because I had just finished a six-mile walk along this black country road lit only by the moon and with just the rustle of an occasional small animal to break the silence? And that it was part of a 128-mile relay race aimed at bringing attention to people who need a transplant?

Perhaps they would, because my companion, 34-year-old Ana Stenzel, had rigged up on one side of her a curtain rod holding up a tube that was giving her medications intravenously and on the other was breathing oxygen from an almost empty tank.

I owed my precarious situation to Dr. Jeff Shapiro, an anesthesiologist at Sequoia Hospital, Redwood City, who invented an annual 199-mile relay [www.therelay.com] run from Calistoga to Santa Cruz, which starts one morning, goes through the night and finishes the next afternoon, and is designed to remind people of the thousands of lives lost every year through the acute shortage of donated organs. The relay walk is the shorter, less heroic, but still testing, version of that race.

It is testing not simply because it goes on all night and over the Santa Cruz Mountains, but also because, although some participants are strong walkers, many other have had serious health problems and some have been at death's door, scarcely able to move. Of the 12 people on my walking team, one had received a new pair of lungs only 10 months before, another was a grandmother who has had a liver transplant and a third had donated one of her kidneys to her husband, who was also on the team.

Two others, though not hit directly by illness, were parents of children who had suffered from cystic fibrosis since birth, the killer that attacks the lungs and doubles up its victims in coughing spasms during the day and wakes them at night in a panic sensation of drowning. And then there was me, who at my age should have been in bed hours earlier after a supper of bread, with the crust cut off, dipped in warm milk.

In the van were various reminders of mortality, including a wheelchair and enough pills to stock a pharmacy. I remember the little tremor that ran through me when I was told that, when it was my turn to walk my two segments of five and six miles, I needed to wear a bib with my medications listed on the back, just in case.

All our team knew people who had died on the transplant list, that agonizing wait that can go on for years and ends either tragically in death or, inspiringly, when a family who has just lost a loved one puts aside its grief long enough to reach out to donate the organs to complete strangers.

In most cases, a transplant converts a sickly, frightening, restricted life into a wholesome and health one almost overnight. It does not guarantee plain sailing, however. Ana herself, who received new lungs in 2000 — and then climbed Yosemite's Half Dome, a 17-mile round trip and 5,000-foot ascent — had organized the team and set her heart on competing. But transplanted lungs are particularly susceptible to rejection and she had been hit so hard in the days before the race that she has been put on the list for a second transplant. She is still waiting.

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People who have endured sickness since birth often have remarkable strength and independence, however. I will never forget seeing her, still hooked up to her oxygen tank, pushing her own wheelchair across the sands at Santa Cruz.

All Californians can help people like Ana by putting their names on the official state registry the next time their driver's license is renewed or simply going online at www.donateLIFEcalifornia.org [for Spanish speakers www.doneVIDAcalifornia.org]. As each donation produces on average three or four organs, that one act could do more to change the world for the better than anything else they will do in their entire lives.

Reg Green is the father of 7-year-old Nicholas Green of Bodega Bay, who was shot during an attempted robbery in Italy in 1994 and whose organs and corneas were donated to seven Italians. The Green family Web site is www.nicholasgreen.org.