Distributed by UW News Service, December 9, 2024

Link to original story: <https://uwm.edu/news/co-worker-gives-a-lifesaving-gift-with-kidney-transplant/>

**Co-worker gives a lifesaving gift with kidney transplant**

Written by Kari Pink

On July 10, UW-Milwaukee staff member Tom Bjornstad had a lifesaving experience when he received a kidney from a coworker.

For more than eight years, Bjornstad, 55, had been on dialysis due to kidney failure. The reality of living with this condition meant more than four hours a day hooked up to a machine, feeling constantly fatigued, consuming a limited diet and shivering most of the time.

Despite physical ailments and limitations, Bjornstad continued to work in UWM’s University Advancement, working closely with UWM Foundation staff, including Bobbi Zeise, a friend and colleague in the accounting department.

Although Bjornstad had been on the transplant list for years, he and his wife, Kelly, were losing hope that a donor would be found. Neither Kelly nor any of his family members were a match.

On April 14, Kelly posted a Facebook message asking her network of friends and family to consider live kidney donation. She knew the chances of her husband finding a match were slim – the odds of matching with someone who’s not a relative [are upwards of 1 in 100](https://exploretransplant.org/beyond-direct-donation-what-if-your-friends-and-family-dont-match/#:~:text=The%20odds%20of%20a%20potential,matches%20for%20their%20intended%20recipients.) – but she figured there were other people like him who could be helped.

Zeise saw the post and decided to begin the testing process to see if she was an eligible donor. “I thought for sure we wouldn’t be a match but that we could do a paired donation where I’d match someone else in need, and because of my gift, Tom would in turn receive a matched kidney,” she said. “It was a couple of months of testing, and we found out on June 7 that we were a match, and Tom would receive the kidney directly from me.”

On July 10, Kelly held her breath as the surgeries on her husband and Zeise began. A few hours later, she learned the transplant of Zeise’s kidney was successful, and Bjornstad soon felt better than he had in years.

“As soon as I woke up, I could feel something was different,” Bjornstad recalled. “I could feel Bobbi literally giving me back my life. Where would this world be if everyone had the same courage and faith in humanity as Bobbi?”

Bjornstad and Zeise have both returned to work and are leading healthy lives. Zeise is eager to spread the word about living organ donation and how something fairly simple for a healthy individual can change the life of someone who is sick.

“My only regret about the whole thing,” she said, “is that it couldn’t happen sooner. Tom didn’t deserve eight-plus years of sickness.”

After the surgery was complete, Kelly expressed her feelings on Facebook: “There truly are no words to express my infinite gratitude for Bobbi Zeise. She has changed the path of our family’s lives forever. Her selfless gift of a kidney has given not only Tom, but our whole family, more than hope. It has given us life. For me, continued adventures and, simply, life with my husband. A dad to our boys. A friend to so many. You are our angel and our hero. We are forever connected to you and your incredible family.”