

Cynthia Bowers' experience with donating a kidney to save a dying child at Phoenix Children's Hospital in 2008 drove her to establish her own volunteering organization.



PHOTO BY JOSH CODDINGTON

Saving a stranger's life

Cynthia Bowers' kidney donation finds just the right child at just the right time

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When Cynthia Bowers learned she could donate an organ while still alive, she knew instantly that she wanted to do it. What she didn't know is that her family would try to talk her out of it, health care professionals would resist her offers to donate a kidney, and doctors would comply with her

demand to make sure the donation would save the life of a dying child.

Bowers was 30 years old and pregnant when she decided to go through with a live donation in 2007, and it would take more than a year to find an organization, a hospital and a set of doctors who would arrange a complex plan to get her kidney to a child who needed it.

Bowers' first calls were met with astonishment

and skepticism from health care professionals who responded as though she had lost her mind.

"I started calling hospitals and telling them I wanted to donate a kidney. They would ask 'why, are you dying?,' Bowers says. "I would say 'no, I have two kidneys and I understand I only need one.' And then, click. I figured they must have

Continued on page 4

'I'd like to tell you that I was really brave the whole time, but the truth is I was scared. But there was never a time I thought I wouldn't do it.'

— Cynthia Bowers, kidney donor and founder of Phoenix Volunteers



Ashley Foss, 24, (center) sorts through donated school books during an event on June 19 organized through Phoenix Volunteers, which connects people with volunteer opportunities through its website.

Saving a stranger's life

continued from page 3

thought I was crazy."

As Bowers persisted to find the right avenue to make her donation, an 11-year-old boy was dying at Phoenix Children's Hospital — he was out of donation options and on a waiting list. His parents and family members had been tested and eliminated as possible matches for a vital kidney donation.

But Bowers was a near-perfect match.

"In the antibody tests, none of his antibodies attacked my cells," Bowers says. "It was like we were actually siblings."

Bowers had passed all of the initial tests months before, including an evaluation to ensure, as Bowers puts it, "that you're not losing your mind and you're well enough to do it." But her aunt, a registered nurse, and her mother both thought the procedure was too risky — and painful.

"They didn't want me to do it," Bowers says. "My mom even called my husband to have him convince me not to do it."

Bowers says she struggled with her decision, but

remained resilient nonetheless. "During the process, there were a lot of times where I would question it," she says. "I'd like to tell you that I was really brave the whole time, but the truth is I was scared. But there was never a time I thought I wouldn't do it."

Her resolve was bolstered by the support of her husband Jeff. "If he didn't want me to do it, I wouldn't have. He did a very courageous thing by supporting me in this thing I wanted to do," Bowers says. "I don't know that he totally understood it, but he could see how important it was to me."

After struggling to get hospitals to take her seriously, Bowers hooked up with the Desert Samaritan Donor Center in January 2008. But she had to wait almost another year to donate because she was due to give birth and would need at least six months to recover between surgeries.

Bowers, though, had one more issue to deal with; she wanted to make sure her donation would go to a child. In most cases, anonymous donors are not allowed to make such specific requests, but Bowers convinced health care professionals to cut through the red tape and allow her to choose the recipient of her kidney.

The operation was scheduled the week before Christmas in 2008. Her surgeon at Banner Good Samaritan Hospital removed her kidney; it was transported

immediately to Phoenix Children's Hospital and placed into the waiting child. And that was it. No information from the boy's doctors or updates on his status was provided; it was an anonymous donation.

"The hardest part of it is feeling very connected to someone who you can never meet," Bowers says. "I can never know anything about his medical status — then or now. I don't know if he's even alive today."

As she lay in her hospital bed on the second night after the operation, she admitted that her aunt "was right about the pain."

Then she got a surprise visit from the surgeon who completed the transplant. Bowers still remembers the surgeon's words: "I put your kidney in the boy. Soon after, he got his color back and he started asking for pizza and hot dogs, and he wanted to go play again."

The surgeon validated all the anxiety leading up to the operation, Bowers says. "After that, I knew I had made the right decision," she says. "I felt like I started recovering right then."

She was released from the hospital on Dec. 22, 2008. She says the first five days after the operation were difficult, but there have been no side effects and she feels great. "I have a scar, and they tell me not to get dehydrated. I was back at work two weeks later." ■



Joe Kaehuri, a 42-year-old commercial land developer who has been volunteering for 20 years, including through Phoenix Volunteers for the past six months, writes pricing labels for donated books during an event at nonprofit organization Treasures4Teachers.

PHOTO BY JOSH CODDINGTON

Giving time over money

Anxious to help others, volunteer forms her own nonprofit

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Even after giving birth and donating a kidney in the same year, Cynthia Bowers found herself looking for more volunteering opportunities — available immediately.

"The donation had consumed my life for a year," says Bowers. "I was done, and I was thinking 'What do I do now?'"

As she began to search for volunteer opportunities, she ran into more red tape. "I was calling agencies and getting frustrated. The process was so complicated, or I wouldn't get a call back because they were so understaffed. I just wanted to be able to go work at a soup kitchen."

She channeled that frustration and the experience of donating the kidney, which she calls "the most amazing thing I've ever done," and founded her own nonprofit organization, Phoenix Volunteers in January 2009. A key component to its success is simplicity. "It's easy to sign up and get

involved," she says. "I go to every event and I make sure volunteers know what they are supposed to do. It's easier to coordinate with one person instead of 25."

Bowers, whose one-woman organization has coordinated 27 volunteer events so far, uses her website, www.phoenixvolunteers.org, to connect interested people with volunteer opportunities. She contacts nonprofits to find out what type of work they need, and then organizes events to fill those needs.

She posts the events on her website, so volunteers can attend if they have time. There's no penalty for missing an event, which 24-year-old volunteer Ashley Foss appreciates.

"Phoenix Volunteers is a lot better than other organizations because I have a young daughter and this format makes it much easier for me to volunteer," Foss says. "You can decide which opportunities fit into your schedule and which don't. You don't get

Continued on page 6

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Barbara Blalock, 46-year-old executive director and founder of Treasures4Teachers, says the volunteer work provided by groups like Phoenix Volunteers is vital to the success of her nonprofit operation, which resells donated classroom supplies at a substantial discount.



PHOTO BY JOSH COBBINGTON

Giving time over money

continued from page 5

into trouble."

Another aspect of Phoenix Volunteers that Foss and other members like is the action-oriented opportunities. "The mission is to promote volunteerism," Bowers says. "You can't just write a check, you have to show up."

"My parents gave to charitable organizations financially," Foss says. "My \$20 won't make much difference, but my time can."

Time is exactly what the nonprofit group Treasures4Teachers needed after the four-person organization received a rather large donation last month. Phoenix Volunteers provided 15 people on a recent Saturday to work for a few hours in the organization's warehouse.

Barbara Blalock, 46, executive director and founder of Treasures4Teachers, said groups like Phoenix Volunteers are vital to her operation, which collects donated school supplies and sells them to teachers at a drastically reduced price.

"The manpower that it took for them to break down those pallets in two hours would have taken us months," Blalock says.

Joe Kachuroi, one of the volunteers at the Treasures4Teachers event, has been volunteering for 20 years. For the 42-year-old commercial land developer, it's about the "Karmaic" equation — "what you put out is what you receive" — and being appreciative.

"I've made millions, lost millions, made millions and lost millions again," Kachuroi says. "You need to always be grateful for what you have, even if you've lost things."

What drives him to donate through Phoenix Volunteers, is the variety of available opportunities and the focus on donating time over money. "We work for many different organizations that touch a lot of families and groups," he says. "Donating money is great, but the need is greater than that. If people just donated money, none of us would be here."

Ultimately, Bowers prides her organization on the fact that it is purely people-driven. The organization costs about \$500 per month to operate, which she pays for out of her own pocket. "I feel strongly about not depending on the government to take care of us," Bowers says. "These are people who take personal responsibility for their community. They don't get paid for this. They show up."

She says Phoenix Volunteers, which has connected about 200 people with volunteer opportunities so far, exists because people support it. "I post an opportunity and I cross my fingers. I have never not had enough volunteers to fill an event," she says. "This is supported by people and not government money. Either the community supports this or it dies out."

What if it does die out?

"If that happens, I'll figure out something else to do," Bowers says. ■

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