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'Wonder Woman' Gives Back by Donating Two Organs to Two Strangers



Jen Reeder April 13, 2021



Photos courtesy of Taira Foster



By the time Colorado resident Taira Foster turned 33, she'd already lived a lot of lives. The soft-spoken vegan was working as a massage therapist at the Hard Rock Casino in Tampa, Fla., after careers in nursing, Planned Parenthood and a four-year stint performing as the princess in a dinner theater production of "Arabian Nights."

Little did she know that 2017 would be the year she added "kidney sister" to the list.

That's when a co-worker confided in her that her son needed a kidney transplant. Foster hoped to donate a kidney to the boy, but their blood types were incompatible.

"I just started doing research on my own and realized how much need there was for living kidney donors, so I decided I was going to try and donate to whoever else might be in need that came my way," she told The News Station.

The National Kidney Foundation estimates over 121,000 Americans need organ transplants – overwhelmingly for kidneys. They also report 13 people die every day while waiting for a kidney transplant.

The overwhelming need for organ donors made it so Foster didn't have to wait long in her quest.



wild, wild Wonder Woman

— Katie Castonguay of Taira Foster —

She shared her desire to donate a kidney to anyone in need on her social media pages. Soon she received a message from a college friend about another Tampa thirty-something who happened to be in desperate need of a kidney: Katie Castonguay.

As a preteen, Castonguay developed kidney failure for unknown reasons. Her mother donated a kidney to her. It lasted about 19 years before she needed to go onto dialysis. Many friends and family members tried to be her donor but were not compatible matches.

Foster reached out to Castonguay and pledged to try to help. The two women met for the first time in the parking lot at Tampa General Hospital before testing appointments. They clicked.

"Initially it felt a little uncomfortable. What do you say? But Katie is just so sweet and bubbly and we ended up talking really openly about expectations," Foster said. "We found out we had a lot in common. We both have theater backgrounds. We were both the same age. One of our favorite artists is Jenny Lewis, which most people never heard of. So it was very cool."

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During Foster's donor evaluation, which included blood and urine samples, an EKG and chest X-ray, she never felt nervous about the impending surgery – although she'd never had one – just about the test results.

"You get all this testing done, and it's testing that you wouldn't normally have done, so who knows what they're going to find? I was always eager, waiting to hear about my results, waiting to hear if Katie and I are a match," she said.

They were. Surgeons at Tampa General Hospital successfully transplanted Foster's right kidney into her new friend Aug. 10, 2017. After Foster woke up, she had a visit from her recipient's dad, Mark.

"He had tears in his eyes, and said, 'Katie has more color in her face just an hour after surgery than she's had in years,'" she recalled. "I thought that was really sweet."



Talra Foster and Katie Castonguay visit.

Foster was initially surprised by the intensity of the pain in her abdomen, the area of the incision. Tightening her stomach muscles even for a moment hurt. Still, she was discharged from the hospital after two nights and didn't need any pain medication at home. She even helped her parents paint their apartment in the first week after surgery.

Not only did the experience create a lifelong bond with her "kidney sister," it led Foster down a new career path as a living donor coordinator. She now shepherds others through the organ donation process. She and her husband moved to Denver, Colorado, after Foster landed her "dream job" at UCHealth University of Colorado Hospital.

Coincidentally, the hospital performed the world's first liver transplant in 1963. It also has an active donor program, so Foster started thinking about giving another one of her life-sustaining organs to a stranger.

"I just felt like I had more to give," she said. "Kidney donation was a great experience for me, so I figured, why not?"

After another round of testing, Foster let the team know she would donate to anyone in need.

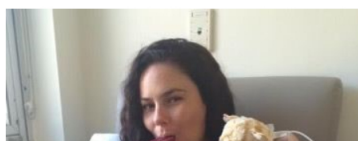
"It just so happened that based on my anatomy, I was only approved to donate the smallest portion of my liver, which could only go to a baby," she said. "I felt very excited by that idea. It's extra special when it's a baby or a child. It just feels more precious, I guess."

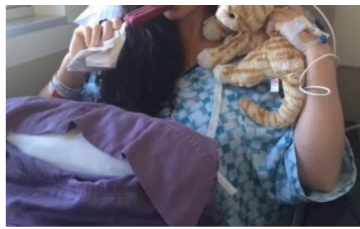
On Sept. 4, 2019, she donated a portion of her liver to save the life of a little girl she's still never met, and whose name she doesn't know.

"I got to hear my liver went to an 11-month-old baby, and while I was in the hospital for five days, they'd update me: 'The baby's doing well.' That's about as much information as I got," she said. "It was totally worth any suffering I endured."

Naturally, she would love to connect with the girl and her family if they ever choose to reach out to her through the hospital.

"I definitely have that curiosity of wondering who this little person is," she said. "Where does she come from, and who is she going to become?"





Taira Foster in the hospital holding a stuffed cat from her grandmother.

Overall, the liver donation was more challenging. Foster recovered from the surgery after 12 weeks and needed to abstain from alcohol for a year. It wasn't too hard, though she missed being able to drink red wine with her dad when he visits and they swap Spotify playlists with music that ranges from Trevor Hall (hers) to Gipsy Kings and The Ozark Mountain Daredevils (his).

In donating both a kidney and a portion of her liver, Foster not only saved two lives, but joined an exclusive group: living donors who have given organs to different people. According to data from the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network, only 87 Americans did so between April 1, 1994, and December 31, 2020. "Double donors" like Foster are extremely rare.

Living organ donors make a huge impact by saving lives while posing an extremely low health risk to themselves, according to Doctor Peter Kennealey. He's the surgical director of the kidney and pancreas transplant programs at UCHHealth, where Foster works. One kidney donor he knows returned to racing competitively in triathlons.

"In many instances, the donor is in the hospital for one day," the surgeon told [The News Station](#). "They're back to using their cell phone and laptop and iPad that evening. They're off narcotics within 24 to 72 hours, and back to basic activity within a couple of days...These donors are making a massive impact on a lot of people's lives."

Foster makes an additional impact through her role as a transplant coordinator by being able to relate to potential donors, he added, since she has gone through the donation process herself.

While clients have told Foster, now 36, how much hearing about her personal experiences helped them, she feels it's mutual.

"I feel incredibly lucky and grateful that I get to work with awesome people wanting to help others in need and willing to give a gift in this way," she said. "It's a very rewarding job, and I definitely feel like it is my purpose to do this work."

Foster's kidney recipient, Castonguay, gives back through her career as well. She works as the education director at a nonprofit cultural center – "which basically means I'm in charge of setting up classes, and field trips, and educational programming for ages three to 103" – and has also worked with children with special needs.

Thanks to Foster's kidney donation, Castonguay is off dialysis and able to take long hikes in the mountains again. She told [The News Station](#) she feels strongly about helping others since she has received the gift of life from both Foster and her mom.

"I can live my life to the fullest and play it forward to others who are struggling," she said.



It is hard to express how grateful she is to the former stranger who gave her renewed vigor through such a selfless act. She turned to simple words – "I love you" – the second time she met Foster.

"I was like, 'I know this is literally our second time meeting, but I love you. I genuinely love you. You saved my life,'" she recounted. "You gave back to me so that I can give to others."

She is amazed by Foster's decision to donate part of her liver to a toddler, calling her a "wild, wild Wonder Woman."

"I just admire Taira so much," she said. "When I start to get discouraged, I think of her and I think of all the things that she has done to better others' lives. She has the kindest, warmest heart. It's just inspiring."




Jen Reeder

<http://JenReeder.com%20>

Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America. Bylines include BBC News, The Christian Science Monitor, The Daily Beast, Inside Your Dog's Mind, HuffPost, the TODAY show's website, PBS's Next Avenue and many other publications. Visit her online at JenReeder.com



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