

Episode 05: Mark gave his kidney to a stranger

What kind of person gives one of his own kidneys to a total stranger? Well, you're about to find out.

Mark works as an attorney here in the Tampa Bay area so he's actually not too far from where I live, but that's actually just a coincidence. I heard about his story and contacted him because I knew it would be interesting, and I had lots of questions for him.

I wanted to know how he found out about this person who needed a kidney, if they actually met in person, and what lead him to make the decision to actually do something like this for someone he didn't even know. I also wanted to ask him about his own risk assessment – since he only has one kidney himself now, what if that one fails? What if HE needs a kidney later on.

We also talked about the actual process – the testing, the surgery, the recovery, all the details. So if you've ever thought about donating a kidney to someone, this will give you the kind of overall information about what you might expect.

If you want to contact Mark, I'll have his email address in the show notes for this episode, which is at whatwasthatlike.com/05. Also in the show notes will be some resources for you in case you want to explore the possibility of doing this. I'm actually considering it myself. There's a huge need for this, and most of us are walking around with the ability to literally save someone's life. For me, it's just kind of hard to ignore that, especially after this conversation. I definitely learned a few things, and I hope you do too.

Scott

Mark, thanks for coming on to the show!

Mark

Thanks for having me.

Scott

You recently decided to give away one of your kidneys. Was that process more difficult than you expected? Or was it less difficult?

Mark

It was less difficult. I mean, it was an easy decision for me. I saw somebody with a need and I just decided to act on it. I didn't really have any significant emotional hesitation. The process of getting tested and approved was lengthy just because there's some downtime when you're waiting for the test results and stuff. Within three months or so, I was approved for surgery on a date that was about 6 weeks out from there. The recovery has been easier than I expected. It's been, by far, very easy and I've gotten much more out of it, personally, than I would have expected.

Scott

Good. I want to talk to you about that a little bit later. If people are considering doing something like this, they would have excuses like, "Oh, I don't know. It's gonna take long. It's gonna hurt. It's gonna be very complicated." Maybe, we can take away those excuses today.

Mark

Yes, possibly.

Scott

So tell me first: what's your general life situation in terms of marital status, kids, health history, and things like that?

Mark

I'm 44 years old and I'm married. I've got 3 kids who are all in elementary school. I have a full-time job as a lawyer. So, I'm busy with kids and work. There's nothing else major going on in my life. I don't have any significant health problems in my past.

Scott

That was, kind of, part of the reason that would make you eligible as a donor - the fact that you don't have other health issues. Is that right?

Mark

At least, I had no significant health issues that would complicate the surgery. They did an unbelievable job of making sure that you don't have any problems that should disqualify you. In fact, the nurse coordinator whom I dealt with a lot through the donation process has told me that, over time, they've sometimes found cancer or other health problems in people that they didn't know about because the organ donation process requires them to conduct comprehensive health examinations such as CTs, X-rays, blood work, etc. Everybody should go through that just to, maybe, discover something that might be wrong with them which they don't know yet.

Scott

Right. And it essentially costs nothing anyway, right?

Mark

It costs the donor \$0. The only thing that I've paid for through this entire process has been my parking at the hospital, which was \$3 a day - that's it. The donor program at Tampa General Hospital - I think this is true for every donor program - make sure that I didn't have to spend a single penny on any medical expenses. They don't even file anything with your insurance. Everything is just free.

Scott

Because they definitely don't want that to be an excuse for people to not donate...

Mark

They told me, at the beginning, that if I ever get a bill from them, I should call them because it was a mistake and they will delete it.

Scott

That's a sentence that everyone wants to hear as they walk into the hospital.

Mark

Yeah. Right. It's good to know that if you need to donate to a friend, relative, or stranger, financial issues are not a problem. You may need to have a couple of weeks out of work, which not everybody can absorb very easily. But, you can either take vacation time, or your recipient is legally permitted to reimburse you for lost wages. So, if you needed that, if that was a hurdle for you, the recipient can at least pay you back for the time that you've missed from work without

pay, which is nice. The same is true of travel expenses. If you were to travel, and you have to stay in a different city for 1-2 weeks to do the surgery and recover, they're allowed to pay your travel expenses for your hotel and other expenses. Why can't you sell your kidney? They have made it in a way so that some of those financial hurdles are eliminated, which is nice.

Scott

All right. Your situation was all local. I didn't think of the recipient who might be out of state or something.

Mark

Yeah. I've seen a story recently where a high school classmate traveled across the country to donate to an old classmate who had posted something on Facebook saying, "Hey, guys, I'm gonna die if I don't get a kidney, if anybody's willing to help." This guy said, "I haven't talked to you in 30 years, but I'll see if I'm a match." And he was a match. So, he had to travel across the country. Then, he had to stay there for a couple of weeks because they wanted to keep track of him, check up on him, and stuff. If he needed it, he would be able to have his travel expenses paid.

Scott

It's interesting to know that the person that's donating has to go through all these tests. You said that, sometimes, things are discovered that they wouldn't, otherwise, know about. So essentially, by trying to do something nice for someone else, they could probably save their own life.

Mark

Yep, that can definitely happen. The anecdote that was told to me by my nurse coordinator was that they've found people with early-stage cancer whom they've caught early because they happen to be going through the donation process.

Scott

That's really cool. Can you tell us how you first discovered the recipient? His name is Mack, correct?

Mark

Yeah.

Scott

How did you first come across him and what he needed?

Mark

Well, I was at work when I was making a cup of coffee early in the morning at, like, 7 o'clock. I noticed a flyer up on the bulletin board - the bulletin board we all have in our offices that has the minimum wage notices, the sexual harassment policy, and all those things.

Scott

Stuffs that nobody ever reads...

Mark

Yeah. So, this flyer caught my eye. It was a couple that was dancing. The headline was, "Are you my blood type?" That caught my eye. It said, "My name is Mack so-and-so. I have kidney

disease and I need a kidney. If you're willing to help, please call this number." It was his wife's number.

Scott

How did that flyer happen to come up in your office? Does she work there?

Mark

Well, I didn't know this at the time, but Mack is the father-in-law of another lawyer in my office. His last name isn't the same because he's an in-law, but I didn't really think about it at the time. I just assumed that it was a friend or neighbor of somebody who worked in the office - I didn't know who it was. So, I called and talked to Mack's wife, and she told me who to contact at Tampa General Hospital to get tested, etc. Then, eventually, we figured out that her daughter-in-law worked with me at the office which is why the flyer was there. I didn't have an independent friendship with this colleague, I had never met her family, and I never met Mack. They got this flyer into my office and that's how they found me.

Scott

That's what makes this whole story so interesting - you decided to just give one of the organs from your body to someone that you don't even know. What are the factors that you considered - the pros and cons - when you make a decision like that?

Mark

Well, I just thought that I have the ability to save this person's life, extend their life, or make their life better for the little time that they have left. I thought that there's got to be minimal risk for me because they do this all the time. People donate kidneys - not enough people do it - and a lot of them come from cadavers who were also organ donors. When they pass away, they get a kidney or other things that people need.

Scott

That's where the majority of them come from, right?

Mark

Yes. I looked it up out of curiosity last month. I'm using ballpark numbers here - I think, in the US, there were about 115,000 - 125,000 people who needed a kidney, but there were only about 17,000 transplants for the year that I was looking at. I think there were about 5,000, or fewer, who were live donors. When you narrow it down, it was a much smaller list of people who were donating to acquaintances or people whom they didn't know. Most people would donate to a close relative.

Scott

Right. Someone you already have a relationship with.

Mark

Living donors' kidneys are just way better for the recipient than cadavers' kidneys. They work better. There's a higher success rate. So, it's good to have a living donor over a cadaver - if you can find one.

Scott

What was Mack's reason for needing a kidney? Were both of his kidneys failing?

Mark

Yeah. He had had kidney cancer, at a point, and had part of the kidney removed. Then, for reasons that I'm not completely aware of, that led to both kidneys failing over time. He had been on dialysis for two years - he had been undergoing dialysis for about 3-4 hours, 3 times a week. He would say that it feels like running a marathon - it just wears you out that day and the next day - it's really debilitating to be on dialysis.

Scott

I'm not all that familiar with dialysis. Is that something that you can continue indefinitely?

Mark

Oh, no. At some point, you'll be too sick for dialysis and you'll just die from that kidney disease. I'm not sure what is the world's longest duration of anyone undergoing dialysis, but I know that you just can't do it forever. Eventually, it will not work anymore.

Scott

I'm trying to figure out the thought process of someone who might know a person in need - like Mack who was on dialysis - and deciding, "Should I go through this process and donate one of my kidneys to this person?" I would think some of the rationales may be, "Well, he's on dialysis. He can continue that until, eventually, he finds a live donor or a cadaver kidney. But, that's not really the case - people just die.

Mark

Yeah. A lot more people die while waiting for a kidney and using dialysis as a stopgap measure than getting a kidney on the waiting list.

Scott

Yeah, based on your numbers, we're like 100,000 kidneys short.

Mark

In a country of - I don't know - 200 million adults, we ought to be able to bridge that gap.

Scott

Yeah. It seems like it's mainly just a matter of awareness.

Mark

I think there's more than just that. I think, what people think is, "Well, what if I need that kidney for my parents, children, brothers, or sisters." But if you don't have any history of having kidney disease, the odds of needing a kidney transplant is so remote that it's not a good reason not to donate to somebody else. I think people might not understand how this is so safe. It's a quick recovery. You can live with one kidney for the rest of your life without any significant complications. I know I just did this, so it's kind of easy for me to say, "To me, it's a no-brainer." I wish I could do it again. If I had three kidneys, I would give away the second one. We all walk around with the ability to save somebody's life.

Scott

Yeah. We're all walking around with a spare tire and passing by people who have a flat tire.

Mark

Yeah. It's not as simple for everybody as I made it out to be. You may have health problems that disqualify you or whatever other issues you have, but it doesn't ever hurt to get checked. If there's a person out there that you're a match for, you can save their life, you change their whole family's life. Now, they get to see their grandkids graduate from high school and whatever else they have going on.

Scott

When you heard about Mack - after you saw that flyer and called his wife - did you go meet him? What's the process?

Mark

Well, I called in early March of this year and I talked to his wife. I didn't make any effort at that time to talk to Mack or to meet him. I felt like I shouldn't meet him at that moment because I wasn't sure what he was going through, I wasn't sure how much he would want to get to know me, or to what extent he had hopes that were crushed in the past by potential donors. So, I got a little bit stand-offish. Between March and mid-June when I finally got fully approved to do the surgery, I hadn't had any contact with Mack at all. I was just always texting, having phone calls with his wife, and talking to the hospital people.

Scott

Now, you've already met him. Did he want to contact you during that time?

Mark

Once I was fully approved in mid-June, I told Bonnie - his wife's name is Bonnie- "Hey, listen. I would love to meet Mack and get to know him, if he wants that. But that's up to him to decide. So far, I haven't brought it up because I just didn't know how he would feel about it. But I'll leave that up to you guys." She said, "He would love to meet you. He has been wanting to meet you. I've been telling him about all of our conversations. Let's figure out a time when we can have you and your family over for dinner or have you all over to our house. You can meet the rest of the family too, if that's okay with you."

Scott

That's got to be pretty exciting - meeting him for the first time.

Mark

Yeah. So, in mid-June, after we had that discussion, I started texting with Mac a lot. We developed a texting relationship from mid-late June until I met him for the first time on July 15. When I took my wife and kids over to his house and met his wife, kids, and grandkids, everybody was there for just, like, a little informal barbecue dinner.

Scott

They all wanted to meet Mark, the hero!

Mark

Right, right. Yeah. That always made me feel a little uncomfortable.

Scott

What's the distance between where you guys live?

Mark

About 20 minutes drive.

Scott

That's convenient.

Mark

Yeah, yeah.

Scott

Well, I guess that makes sense. If somebody puts up the flyer in your office, they should be nearby.

Mark

Yeah. So, once I met him on July 15, I said, "How about we get together once a week for breakfast in the morning when you have dialysis? I can drop you off for dialysis after that." So, we did that for 3-4 weeks before the surgery. We would meet for breakfast in Clearwater at 8.30 o'clock in the morning. Then, I would drop him off at the dialysis center at 10.00 AM and go to work late. That's how we got to know each other before the surgery. Not to mention, we were texting almost every day, like, "How are you feeling? What's going on with you?" We talked about politics and whatever else. We got to know each other pretty well in the 30 days before the surgery.

Scott

I know you both are not related, but do you feel like you're almost like family now?

Mark

Yeah, it does feel a bit like that. I definitely feel a connection to him and his family that I would like to keep up.

Scott

When you first told your family, friends, or even co-workers that you decided to do this, what was the common reaction? Was there any negativity or criticism of this at all?

Mark

Well, at first, they thought I was kidding because I think it's just a common joke to say something like "Yeah, I'll give my left kidney if the Bucs won the Super Bowl" or whatever. I went through the process of telling my wife, dad, kids for about two months. The reason for that was because I would feel really uncomfortable telling people about it and getting the kind of praise that I thought I would get. It kind of felt, like, out of the blue, saying to your friends, "Hey, I just donated \$100,000 to my church. What do you think of that?"

Scott

"I just made an anonymous donation. But, yeah. That was me!" Right?

Mark

I'm not anonymous. So, for a while, I didn't tell anybody. Then, in June, when I was close to being fully approved, one of the processes you have to go through is meeting a psychiatrist for 15-20 minutes who would ask, "Hey, why are you doing this? How are you feeling?" They just want to make sure that I'm okay, I wasn't being pressured by anybody, I'm not feeling anything that I shouldn't be. So, she asked me that question. She said, "How do your friends and family

feel about it?" And I said, "Well, I've only told my dad, my wife, and my kids. I haven't told anybody else." And she said, "What do you mean by you haven't told anybody else?" I said, "Well, I feel uncomfortable telling people because it feels like I'm bragging about something. I'm not in it for attention." Then, she said, "You need to tell your friends and family. Just tell them!" So, I started to tell people. In some instances, I sent out text messages to them, saying, "Hey, I want you to know something that's going on in my life. I've decided to do this. I'll probably have surgery in a month or two. Here's why I'm doing it. Here's who I'm doing it for." That type of thing. Their reactions ranged from "I'm really proud of you. That's such a wonderful, selfless, honorable thing to do. I'm really in awe of you doing that for somebody" to "What?! Are you crazy?! Why are you doing that when you don't know this person? I would never do that! That's nuts!" Otherwise, they're all positive reactions. I mean, there was a little bit of "Wait, why? That's crazy!" but in a kind of a funny way. My wife struggled with it quite a bit, I think, because - this was a mistake that I made - I didn't talk to her about it more seriously. She had some concerns, but my reactions to her concerns were, "What are the odds of me being a match? What are the odds that he has 3-4 other family members who tried but were not a match or couldn't donate for various reasons? What are the chances that I'm a match for the stranger that I've never met?" I don't think that we really talked about her worries and concerns as much and as seriously until I was fully approved.

Scott

Then her concerns suddenly became real.

Mark

Yeah. So, she struggled a bit with, "What if something happens to you? What if you died during surgery or any of those things?" The risks are so minimal that I wasn't worried about those things, but my loved ones still do get worried. I had parents who were worried about me because I would have surgery unnecessarily.

Scott

Yeah. There's always an element of risk. But it's so minimal as compared to the reward and payoff of what you know that you're able to achieve. You're right - it's kind of a no-brainer.

Mark

I had people who I told this to and they would say, "That means so much to me because my father, or my best friend from high school, or whoever died from kidney failure. I'm really glad you're doing this for somebody."

Scott

Wow. Well, yeah, I can understand your reaction or your feeling of, "Why would I go and just tell everybody this?" Just for the record, for this podcast, I want everybody to know that I contacted you. I heard about the story and I contacted you. You didn't send me an email saying, "Hey, I'd like to come on your show."

Mark

I've come to a stage where I'd be okay with that because I've come around from talking to Mack and other people to the point that I should tell as many people as I can. Maybe, there's one person out there who I talked to, who is presented with a similar opportunity, and they do it because they know I did it and everything was great. So, even though I still feel uncomfortable about it, I don't react well to compliments and praise. It makes me feel a little uncomfortable. I would make jokes out of it and deflect away from it a little bit. I've come to think that I should get

the word out as much as I can because there may be 1 or 2 people that I reached who are willing to do this for somebody else.

Scott

So, your discomfort with praise takes a backseat to the importance of getting the message out. What kind of testing did you have to go through? You said it was, like, three months?

Mark

Yeah, it was three months, but that's with a lot of downtime between tests. So first, they made sure that I have the same blood type. The first thing you would do is go into LabCorp or whatever lab, they draw blood and make sure that you have the correct blood type and you don't have any diseases that would impede the donation process. Then, the next thing that you do is to urinate into a plastic jug for 24 hours. That allows them to analyze your kidney function. They want to make sure that you have absolutely wonderful, perfect kidney function if you're going to donate a kidney - I don't understand the technicalities of it, but something about looking at a 24-hour span of your urine allows them to do that. I ended up doing that twice because there was some weird reading in my first test that they thought was a false-positive. So, they wanted to confirm, and they did confirm that it was a false-positive in that testing process.

Scott

Do you have to drink a lot during that 24 hours?

Mark

Well, I don't have to. They're not expecting you to produce any particular amounts. They don't tell you to drink any more or less than you normally do. You'll be surprised by how much you pee in a day. They handed me a jug that was the size of a full gallon. I looked at it and thought that they were joking. So, I thought, maybe, they're not expecting me to fill this up. I think, subconsciously, I did drink a little more than I normally would.

Scott

You don't want to disappoint them, right?

Mark

Yeah. By the end of the 24 hours, I was worried that I won't have another jug to pee in. So, you normally only fill that jug once, but I did it twice. Then, once you've passed those hurdles, you have to be at the hospital for a couple of days in a row, 2-4 hours at a time, to get a CT scan to make sure that the kidney that they remove - which is typically the left kidney - has good blood flow, good veins, and your other kidney also has good health and everything looks good. They make sure that you don't have any other health problems in your body that you're not aware of. So, they also take X-rays as part of the same process. Then, of course, they take blood samples, urine samples - just a normal one. At that same time, you also meet the surgeon and a couple of the other folks that would be part of the surgery team - they would answer your questions and explain everything to you. One good thing - and this is true everywhere for organ donors nationally - is when you go through that testing process and those meetings, the donor's team of nurses and surgeons is yours and yours alone. They don't know your recipient. They don't treat him. There's no potential conflict of interest there where they don't develop a relationship with the recipient, they don't get influenced by their love of him and their need to find him a donor. They're looking out for you and you alone.

Scott

That's the way it should be.

Mark

Yeah. So, there's no risk from them to say to a donor, "Hey, listen. This is risky. There's a gray area here. But you know what? Mack's a great guy. He's got a wonderful family. He's been waiting for so long. He's really suffering. We really think you should go through with it." They don't know that person. They don't have any emotional connection to them, so they can be objective, be detached, and make that decision with you. So sorry, I got a little off-tracked, but that's, kind of, the last bit of the testing. That only took me three months because when they take your blood sample, you don't get the results for several days. Then, you have to make an appointment to do the urine sample. Once you've done that, they won't get the results for several days. Then, you have to make an appointment to do the CT and the X-ray. Then, they don't have all those results for a week. Then, you have to go back to have a follow-up meeting and set a surgery date. The next thing you know is - even though you've only done, maybe, a total of 5-6 total days of showing up and doing something - a couple of months or more just went by. So, it's not that onerous. It's not, like, it was three months of high-intensity and time-consuming testing. It's just that it takes a little time to get everything done, get the results back, and set new appointments. Other people are also going through this same process at the same time.

Scott

So, once you're determined to be a match, how long before will the surgery be scheduled? Is it just based on the surgeon's availability or?

Mark

It usually takes about a month or so because of the surgeon's availability. They have other people scheduled for transplant surgeries in their pipeline, so it's usually about a month later.

Scott

How long does the surgery take?

Mark

I think my surgery was about 2-3 hours. The recipient's surgery was a little bit longer. The surgeons told me that I had the biggest kidney that they've ever seen, so it took longer to implant it.

Scott

Something else to brag about, right?

Mark

Where was Guinness when you needed them?

Scott

Does the same surgeon take it out of you and put it into him?

Mark

No. When they took the kidney out of me, they walked and brought it across the hall. There's another surgeon there that's already been performing surgery on the recipient for an hour to get them ready. Then, my surgeon completed my surgery, closed me up, and made sure everything's okay with me while the recipient's surgeons were implanting that kidney across the

hall. It may be literally across the hall - it's definitely very close by. So, they staggered the surgeries with two different surgeons. My surgery started at 7.30 o'clock in the morning and, I think, Mack's surgery started at 9.30 AM. They timed it up so that when the kidney is ready and available, they're ready to actually implant it into the recipient.

Scott

Obviously, they've done this enough that they have it down to an art or science.

Mark

Like, I think they told me that my surgeon did 59 live donor transplants at Tampa General Hospital last year - if my memory is correct.

Scott

Now, obviously, after both surgeries, you guys are both still in the same hospital for recovery. Were you near each other?

Mark

Yeah!

Scott

They didn't put you in the same room for recovery, right?

Mark

No. The recipient has to go to the ICU for a day or two because they just need to keep a closer eye on them for any anti-rejection, drugs, and different issues. They may have to make sure that the new kidney is working well and being accepted. So, for the first 24-36 hours, Mack was in an adjoining building in the ICU and we didn't see each other. We saw each other in the morning after surgery - our families waited in the same waiting room. After the surgery, we didn't see each other for about 24-36 hours. Then, when I was well enough to get up and walk, he was in a regular room at that point. So, I was able to go walk in and see him. I think I went to see him 3 times before I was discharged.

Scott

I can picture you walking in the room saying, "Hey, Mack! How's the kidney doing?"

Mark

Yeah, exactly. "Hey, I changed my mind. Just kidding!"

Scott

Were both of his kidneys removed and he only has just one of yours now?

Mark

One surprising thing I learned is that they leave your old, useless kidneys inside of you when you get a new kidney.

Scott

So, he literally has three kidneys now?

Mark

He got three kidneys - two of them are useless and one of them is a 44-year-old useful kidney.

Scott

Do you know the reasoning behind that? It seems like things would get kind of crowded.

Mark

I don't think it's too crowded. I was told that it's just completely unnecessary and time-consuming to remove the old kidneys. So, they don't do it.

Scott

That's certainly non-intuitive, though. I never would have thought that.

Mark

I think they may get a little smaller when they're not in use. They told me that my remaining kidney will get a little bit bigger as it increases its capacity to make up for the fact that I only have one. So, I already had the world's largest kidney and, now, it's going to get even bigger.

Scott

Do the donor always take the left one or the right one?

Mark

I was told that they usually take the left kidney because that's easier to get to. There are fewer other organs surrounding your left kidney than your right kidney. I think they can pick the right one if they need to. I don't have a percentage to give you, but usually the left.

Scott

So, there was a possibility that Mack's body would not accept your kidney and you don't know that until after the surgery. If that would have happened, do you know what they would do then? Do they give it back to you or do they give it to somebody else?

Mark

No. If it doesn't work out, he would pass away or just have the same problems and be back on dialysis. That's just the end of it - you can't get the kidney back.

Scott

Right. So, they don't take it back out of him?

Mark

No.

Scott

I wonder how often that happens - probably, not very often.

Mark

I don't think so. Part of the process of ensuring that there's a good match is that there are things about my kidney that match up to his body. I couldn't give you the scientific names behind it.

Scott

You just have to trust that they know what they're doing.

Mark

Yeah, exactly.

Scott

How long were you in the hospital overall?

Mark

About 48 hours or so. I went into the hospital at 5.30 o'clock in the morning on a Thursday, and I left at 3 or 4 o'clock in the afternoon, two days later.

Scott

It seems it didn't take long at all, then.

Mark

It was about 48 hours from when I was out of the surgery. I was told on the front end that most people stay about 48 hours. Some people stay 1 more night - 2-3 nights in the hospital is typical. They told me that they had one person who stayed one night and went home the next day, which I kind of took to be a challenge, but I didn't really try to do that. I definitely felt like going home after two days. I felt good.

Scott

You felt like going home because you felt okay and you were probably bored being in the hospital, right?

Mark

Yeah, I just felt like it was time to get home. It's nice to have nurses there taking care of me around the clock, but I felt like I could do it at home. I was feeling good. So, it was time to get out of there. So, I headed home on that Saturday afternoon.

Scott

How long did they tell you to recover at home? You're still recovering at home now, right?

Mark

Yeah. It's been one week today. I'm feeling so good that - if my wife would let me - I would go back to work today. I really feel great after one week. I can elaborate a little bit about the recovery process, but to answer your question, they told me to expect to be out of work for 2-4 weeks. I think that was a little bit of a pessimistic prediction - I think they don't want you to underestimate and make commitments that you can't keep. I think I've recovered more quickly than most people and I'm ready to go back to work in a week. I do have a desk job. I'm not doing construction or something.

Scott

It also depends on the type of work you do.

Mark

Yeah. Typically, it takes probably 2 weeks based on what they told me. I think, usually, most people are ready to go back to work and get back to normal life after a couple of weeks.

Scott

Can you talk about the levels of pain - after the surgery and during your recovery? How painful Was it?

Mark

It's not as bad as I feared. Of course, they do it laparoscopically, which means that they cut 3 small incisions just so they can get tools in to do what they need to do. But then, they still need to make like a 4-6 inch incision down by what I call the bikini line - even though I haven't worn a bikini in a while - to get the kidney out. Unlike an appendectomy where you can pull your old diseased appendix out of a hole and nobody cares, you can't pull the kidney out of a little hole or else it'll get damaged. So, they have to cut an incision large enough to safely get the kidney out and not damage it. So, that wound was pretty sore for 2 or 3 days, especially if I had to do anything that involved my midsection like getting up and down, coughing, laughing, sneezing, things like that. There'd be a little pain in that wound, but it wasn't too bad. I had plenty of pain medication for the first 3-4 days as needed. The biggest complication I had - and I had the same problem when I had an appendectomy a long time ago - is shoulder pain because, apparently, when they do a laparoscopy, they put some CO2 gas inside your torso. So, that gives them some space to work and be able to see. When they close you up, some of that gas that's still trapped inside your body, apparently, irritates your diaphragm. Your diaphragm doesn't like it. It doesn't interfere with your breathing, but there's a nerve that runs from your diaphragm to your shoulders and you get what's called 'displaced pain'. Your diaphragm is irritated, but your shoulders are where you feel the pain. So, it has probably been 4 days since I'm out. Yesterday was the 5th day, and it was my first day without shoulder pain. So, for about four days, I had some fairly intense shooting pains on one of my shoulders from that process - it was the same symptom. It just naturally goes away after a few days.

Scott

Did they tell you to expect that shoulder pain?

Mark

Yeah, they told me that it was one of the possible side effects of having laparoscopic surgery. I think it's fairly common, but my shoulder pain was worse than the abdominal surgery pains or anything related to that. My shoulder pain was my nemesis for 4-5 days.

Scott

Some people probably never even have that.

Mark

Yeah. I don't think that happens to everybody.

Scott

I gotta go back and ask you about the location of the incision. You described it as the bikini line. When you said that, I pictured it, like, below your abdomen on the front.

Mark

Yep.

Scott

But when I think of the kidney, I think it's at your back and not right below your stomach. I guess there's not much distance there anyway, so they could pull it out either way. But is it really, like, located below your stomach and not at your back?

Mark

Yeah, it is at the left of my belly button and below my beltline - kind of, below wherever you would wear your pants. Why do they take it out from that spot? I don't know. It probably has something to do with the fact that there's nothing vital right there that they need to cut through, to get it out. They have you on your right-hand side during the surgery, so everything's being done on your left. The laparoscopy incisions that I have are below my left rib cage and the larger incision was below my left beltline.

Scott

Okay. There's probably a YouTube video that animates the process. We should look at that, maybe? What was Mack's recovery time? Have you talked to him? How's he doing?

Mark

Yeah, he's like a new man. They told me that I would probably feel worse than the recipient the day after - he would feel so much better so quickly. When you put a live kidney into somebody that has kidney failure, they said that when they hook your kidney, it immediately turns pink as it should, like any healthy organ. It quickly starts to work in the new body.

Scott

It's got some catching up to do, right?

Mark

And it starts to release whatever chemicals that the kidneys release - the magic dust that we all need to help clean our blood and keep us healthy. It starts doing that in the recipient. So, Mack's family was just amazed. When I saw him on day two, his skin color had changed. It was healthier. He used to have crystallized toxins that would be coming out of his skin from the dialysis process - that was gone! He felt better. He was just like a new man on day one. He felt better right away.

Scott

It's got to be pretty rewarding for you to see that too.

Mark

Yeah, it was really great and wonderful. His family felt like they had him back - like, he was his old self.

Scott

Now that you just have one kidney, what limitations do you have? Are there any activities that you can't do or anything like that?

Mark

Not much on a day-to-day basis. My existing kidney takes over, works a little harder over time, and gets a little larger. They say, "You have about 80% kidney function, which is plenty, even though you only have one kidney. So, it's not like you'll go down to 50%." So, on a day-to-day basis - eating, drinking, normal exercise, urinating - everything's normal. I don't feel any different whatsoever even with just one kidney.

Scott

So, if you got up to urinate once every night, nothing's going to change?

Mark

Nothing changes. Even though my kidney now has not probably gotten up to 80% - I don't know where it is - I don't feel any different, I don't have any problems. In terms of activities, they tell me two things that stick out to me is, "You can't take Advil anymore." I don't know the reason for this. I think Advil must be tougher on your kidneys than some other pain relievers. I think it's like, if you have liver problems, they tell you not to take Tylenol. In the same way, if you have one kidney, they tell you not to take Advil - just take Tylenol or take aspirin or whatever. They don't want you to do any activities that might cause traumatic body injury because you only have one kidney now. So, you want to protect it a little bit more than you used to. If you used to be into kickboxing, MMA, skydiving, football, or any of those things where you're going to have body trauma or potential body trauma, they don't want you to do those things anymore. However, running, riding a bike, going to the gym, lifting weights, playing catch with your kids, scuba diving, and doing all the different things that don't have a high risk of traumatic bodily injury is nothing to worry about - go for it!

Scott

So, it's not an excuse not to exercise then?

Mark

No, it's not - if that's what you're looking for. I did lose 5 pounds in the hospital, but I don't recommend that as a weight loss program.

Scott

Okay, now what happens if you need a kidney sometime later in your life?

Mark

Well, if you have donated a kidney and, then, you need one - you're in your candidate to receive one - you will go toward the top of the waiting list for a kidney, which is nice. It's just something that they do for donors. If you've given up yours for somebody else, then they'll look out for you down the road. There's just a slim chance that you yourself need a kidney.

Scott

Who keeps this list? Where is this list?

Mark

I have no idea. There's a national registry...

Scott

Yeah, there must be a Kidney Foundation or something.

Mark

Yeah. As far as I know, it's first-come-first-serve, but I don't know to what extent they would give priority to people that have an immediate need - people that will die next week versus people with more time to wait. I'm really not sure what the process is with being a living donor. I didn't get to be very educated about what the waiting list is like and what the process is, because most of those people are going to get cadavers' kidneys - they're going to get the kidneys from organ donors who passed away. That's what most of those people are going to end up receiving, which is not as good as having a living donor. The success rates are not as high - it's more difficult.

Scott

At the very least, everyone should be an organ donor if they're eligible, which I think almost everyone is.

Mark

Yeah, please. Some states are trying to do an opt-out system for organ donation where you actually have to opt out of being an organ donor.

Scott

Ah, that's a good idea! I like that!

Mark

That would be great. You don't have to actually do something. It's just assumed that you're an organ donor unless you tell us otherwise, which would be a good thing.

Scott

Knowing what you know now - I think I know the answer to this question - would you do it again?

Mark

Oh, yeah. I wish I could do it again. One of the hiccups that I had - which was not a big deal - I think, was two days ago. On day four, I was home alone, recovering, and just got a little sad, thinking, "Wow, this is it... I can't do this again..." I wish I could do this for somebody else but I can't. I would not hesitate to do it again. I would do it tomorrow if I could. It's been a wonderful experience.

Scott

That's quite a recommendation coming from somebody that has just done it. Throughout this whole process, you saw someone that needed something that you possibly could provide. You didn't know that you'd be eligible when you first inquired, but you were willing to take that first step. Have you ever done anything else like this? If you see someone in need, do you automatically think, "Well, how can I help that person?" Some people might automatically think, "Well, somebody else is going to help them. I don't need to do it." But other people have the mentality, like, "What can I do immediately to help?" And I think that's a mental outlook that some people have. So, have you done other things like this? It doesn't have to be anything this big.

Mark

Yeah, I tend to be that way... This is getting to a point where I feel uncomfortable. I've been a big brother and I've donated a lot of time to pro bono works. I tend to try and help people when I can, and donate my time to different things. I'm not saying that I'm a completely unselfish person, of course, but I think I had a little bit of this in my DNA already.

Scott

I think that's what it is. Some people are just like that. I can understand that you're feeling uncomfortable talking about that and saying that you're one of those people. I think you're right. It's something that's ingrained in some people to just want to help.

Mark

It was the first time I thought of the kidney thing. I've seen on the news - maybe, half a dozen or 10 times in my life - those feel-good human interest stories about somebody who donated a kidney to a friend, family member, or a stranger and I thought that I should do that. I mean, I would do that! Then, that thought was gone because there wasn't somebody in front of me who's asking for it, and my life got busy. We all have thoughts of, "I should exercise more. I should eat better. I should spend more time on charity work. I should go to church" or whatever it is that you feel like you should do but, then, we got busy, we rationalized it away, or we forgot about it.

Scott

I'll get to that someday. Yeah.

Mark

I've had that thought - of doing that - for 5-10 times. Then, when I saw this flyer, I thought that I'm gonna actually do something about it this time. I think I called in quickly so that I wouldn't forget or talk myself out of it.

Scott

That's a good thing. If people are listening to this right now, don't put it off.

Mark

Yeah, go do it!

Scott

So let's talk about that. What if someone is interested in doing this and wants to save someone's life? What's the next step they should take? Who do they contact?

Mark

What I would do to start is to contact the donor program at Tampa General Hospital. There are other donor programs, but that's just a good starting point. They do a great job. We could get the link up on your website.

Scott

You have to consider that this podcast is going to be worldwide. So, people are listening all over the world. They can just contact their local hospital - they must have a donor program as well.

Mark

Your local hospital - if you go online - will have a donor program. They'll have somebody whose job it is to field emails and phone calls from people who are interested in donating, and they'll get you started. I didn't take part in this process, but in recent years, there's been a growing trend toward chain donation. For example, let's say that my wife needed a kidney but I can't donate mine to her because we're not a match. So, I'd say to the chain donation system, "I'll donate my kidney to somebody who can take it - even a stranger - and exchange it with somebody else down in the chain donation who will donate to my wife or somebody else." So, as a way to get my loved one a kidney, I donate my kidney to a stranger who I'm a match with. That's something else that your listeners can check out because they may not have a friend or family member that needs one, but they could be part of that chain and set it into motion. If somebody donates, and it's a match for my loved one, I'll donate myself, and so on.

Scott

So, the person that you know may get one sooner because of that chain, is that right?

Mark

Yeah.

Scott

Okay. That's really cool. I hadn't heard about that before. Is there anything else about this process that we haven't talked about that you think people should know about?

Mark

I would just say how rewarding it has been to get to know the recipient and the difference a small sacrifice has made in their life. I really feel like I got more out of it than he did, which is probably and technically not true, but I honestly feel that way. I get choked up talking about this.

Scott

Yeah. Well, that's understandable. Are you and Mack gonna continue connecting with each other?

Mark

I sure hope so. We talked about still getting together for breakfast once every month or something and inviting the family over for different things. We still text each other every day. I haven't been able to get out, drive, and see him yet, but I will. It's something that I'd like to do. I think that'll happen.

Scott

Sure. You guys have a connection that very few people have.

Mark

Right. I told him, "In the fine print, I have full visitation rights over my old kidney. So I can come to see it whenever I want."

Scott

As a lawyer, I'm sure you thought about putting that in as a clause. Mark, what you've done is pretty tremendous. I hope that, maybe, when someone else hears about how the whole process works, they would decide to do what you've done.

Mark

Yeah, please. It is 110% worth it - whether it is for a loved one, a friend, a stranger, or a friend of a friend. I've heard many different stories about how somebody ended up connected with somebody who needed a kidney. I haven't met or talked to anybody online that has regretted doing it.

Scott

So, the chances are good and it's going to be a successful project.

Mark

Yep!

Scott

All right. If someone wants to contact you, I have your email which you gave me. I'll have that in the show notes for this episode. Thanks again for coming on!

Mark

Yeah, absolutely! If anybody has any questions, I'm happy to talk to them!

Scott

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