

Douglas County sheriff's colleagues unknowingly part of kidney swap

By Jaclyn O'Malley, Reno Gazette-Journal

Two and a half weeks ago, four Northern Nevadans traveled to San Francisco to partake in a kidney-swapping transplant surgery that would end their days on dialysis and help them regain their lives.

The donors volunteered to give their kidneys to either their spouse or friend, but their kidney was not a match. So, they were all put in a database at California Pacific Medical Center that matches kidneys according to blood type and best genetic match.

The local groups who entered the program included a married couple from Gardnerville and two good friends from Carson City and Minden. In a conference room Thursday at California Pacific Medical Center, they and other donors and recipients got to meet for the first time.

But Walter Cooling of Gardnerville had actually known his secret donor, David Brady, of Minden, for 17 years. Brady was a reserve for the Douglas County Sheriff's Office while Cooling had been a deputy.

"I'm gonna pay for this for the rest of my life," Cooling joked to Brady. "Thanks buddy, you saved my life ... I was on dialysis for two years. This man saved my life. It's a miracle."

All gave each other big, lasting embraces and endless smiles.

While Diane Cooling, 55, of Gardnerville, was not a match to donate her kidney to her husband, 67, she was able to give her

kidney to Christina Abeyta, 43, of Newman, in the San Joaquin Valley.

The women held hands and beamed.

“It’s exciting to be part of this and to help two people at once,” Cooling said. Because she agreed to donate her kidney to a stranger, her husband was able to be in the swapping program.

Steven Katznelson, medical director of the center’s kidney transplant program, said everyone was ahead in their recoveries and were part of creating awareness of the ability of live donation to hasten waiting list times. He said their recoveries should take about six weeks. Brady has already been working out, running.

Diane Cooling said she learned about the kidney swapping program through the hospital. She said the surgery was fairly easy and she’s struggling to do the doctor-recommended “taking it easy.”

“Once I learned about the program, I said, ‘Sign me up,’” she said.

Abeyta’s husband, Gilbert, 40, had wanted to donate his kidney to his wife, but it wasn’t a match. Like Diane Cooling, he knew that if he donated to a stranger in the swapping program, his wife would get matched. His kidney went to Bonnie Morrissey of California.

“I’m blessed,” Christina Abeyta said.

Brady has been friends with Reagan Eilers, 57, of Gardnerville for 27 years, meeting through softball. When Eilers’ kidney began failing, Brady wanted to donate to him. But they weren’t a match. Like Cooling and Gilbert Abeyta, he knew by donating to a stranger his friend would get his much needed kidney.

He never would have imagined his kidney would go to his old

friend Walter Cooling.

"We saw each other in the hospital ,and I secretly hoped he would get mine because then he'd owe me," Brady joked. "I'm thrilled to be able to make a contribution."

Monterey Morrissey, 61, of Santa Rosa, Calif., had intended on donating his kidney to his wife, Bonnie, 61. But they didn't match. He was a match for Eilers.

"I feel great," Eilers said. "Dialysis is no fun. I had too much stuff to do for the next 25 years."

Eilers said his kidneys began failing within in the last six to seven months.

"When the doctor said I needed a transplant, I talked to Dave, and he said he wanted to donate right away," he said.

Brady, like Diane Cooling, said the decision to donate was an easy one.

"The opportunity to make a difference in someone's life was my primary drive," he said. "Giving it to (Cooling) is like the icing on the cake."

Dave's wife, Mary, said his kidney donation was "just like Dave to do. I wasn't surprised."

She said that she can see a dramatic change in Eilers, down to his coloring, energy and mood.

"There's a lightness about him," she said.

Eilers' wife said the transplant has ensured that her husband will be able to walk their daughter down the aisle as she marries later this summer. He's also regained his sense of humor and the couple have been going out on walks together.

"I hope that people hear this story and it encourages others to look into donating," she said. "It's life changing. Look at

what it does. And it helps more than one person.”

Diane Cooling saw a similar change in her husband.

“I watched my husband the last two years as his kidneys failed, trying to work through dialysis,” she said. “It’s not a great quality of life ... this has given him a new opportunity to move forward in his life, because it was on hold. He had no freedom on dialysis. Now he has the freedom to travel and live a normal life. You can’t measure that.”