

— IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH —

Lucky No. 14 follows couple everywhere

► **KIDNEY**, from Living 4

"That's the big question," says Joel. "Would I have stuck around knowing what I do today? Yes."

Joel's words aren't spoken lightly; Karen's kidney issues have always loomed in the background of their lives. Especially when Karen thought it might prevent her from having children.

"Close to the time that I proposed, she got all upset thinking that she may not be able to have children, and she didn't want to tie me down in a relationship," says Joel. "After (their conversation) I hung up, I got in the car and drove over to her house. She was kind of shocked when I arrived. And she completely broke down when I told her that I love her for who she is, not what she could give me."

Eventually that issue became moot. Karen was able to bear children, and the family of four lived their lives not really thinking about any health issues, let alone kidney troubles.

But then, in the fall of 2005, Karen got sick. Really sick. She became terribly tired. She developed excruciating joint pain. Her normal after-work walks around Lake Elizabeth left her limp with fatigue.

"I was like, 'Whew — what is wrong with me?' " says Karen. "The energy was just sucked out of me."

After tests revealed that Karen's red and white blood cell counts were plummeting, her physicians initially feared leukemia. They hypothesized that taking immunosuppressant drugs for more than 34 years to prevent Karen's body from rejecting her transplanted kidney had brought it on.

In December of 2005, Karen took a turn for the worse. Her bone marrow, the doctors said, was in a virtual coma and wasn't producing red and white blood cells. In an attempt to kick-start it, doctors tried taking Karen off one of her anti-rejection drugs, a medication called Imuran. Though it worked, and her bone marrow came out of hibernation, Karen still wasn't feeling well. Days later, she was hospitalized for nausea and vomiting.

It proved to be an unlucky, yet lucky development. Karen's gallbladder was full of sludge and had to be removed. But in the process, her doctors also realized her creatinine levels were elevated, indicating a reduced level of kidney function. A battery of blood tests later, it was official: Karen's kidney was shutting down.

Karen couldn't process the information at first.

"I said, 'No. I just said no. This isn't happening,'" says Karen. "I was in denial."

The transplant dilemma

These days, there are two kinds of kidney transplants. There are kidneys that come from unrelated donors who have died, called non-living donors, and there are kidneys that come from living donors.

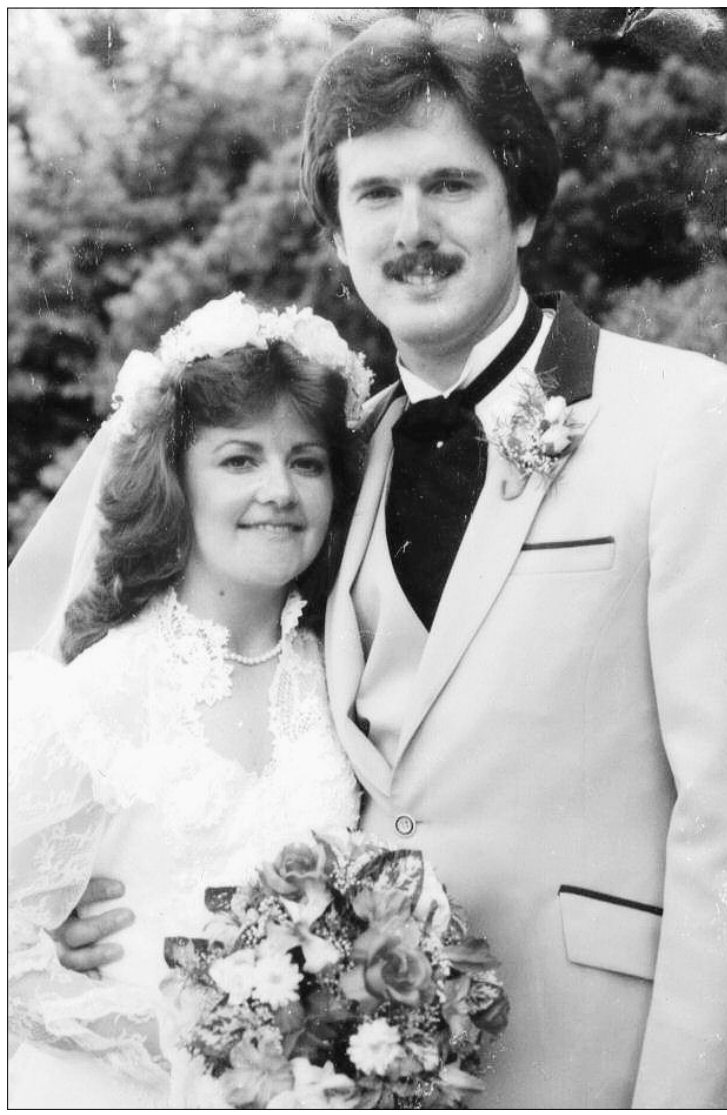
In 1972, Karen Weddick, like most kidney transplant patients at the time, received a kidney from a non-living donor.

"They said I was an easy match," says Karen, who as a teen took BART from her Fremont home to San Francisco, where she'd get her dialysis treatments at San Francisco General Hospital. "I'll never forget the day they found one, either. They had these old elevators, you know, the kind with two doors? Well, as the second door was opening, the dialysis technician was all excited. He said they'd found a kidney. And right away, they took me away in this special shuttle."

Details about the donor were slim. It was a boy. He was younger than she. He'd been killed in a car crash.

"I did everything I could to find those people," says Karen. "If I could show them what they gave me, that they allowed me to finish high school, to become a nurse, to meet a man . . . somebody's son lost his life, but gave me mine."

Since 1972, the science of organ transplantation has changed. Whereas deceased donors were once overwhelmingly favored in kidney transplants — despite the fact the world's first kidney transplant from a living donor took place in 1954 — the number of living donors is slowly increasing. In 2005, 6,570 kidney transplants came



THEN AND NOW: Joel and Karen Weddick (far left), on their wedding day, April 14, 1984, were married at Newark Presbyterian Church. More than 20 years later, Joel and Karen (near left) snuggle in their Fremont home shortly before the kidney transplant surgery.

Left photo courtesy of the Weddick family



GETTING AN UPDATE: Karen and Joel Weddick talk to Dr. Greg Magee as he checks in on them the day after Joel donated a kidney to his wife at Stanford.

How to become an organ donor

More than 95,000 people are in need of donated organs. And while 77 people receive an organ transplant every day, 18 people die each day waiting for a transplant that will never be because of the donated organ shortage.

Becoming a living donor is rare — information about doing so can be found at www.livingdonors.org, which is supported by the National Kidney Foundation — but otherwise, giving the gift of life by becoming an organ and tissue donor is easy.

- Here's how to get started:
- 1. Register with your state donor registry.** California's is the California Organ and Tissue Registry (www.donatelifecalifornia.org).
 - 2. Designate your decision on your driver's license.**
 - 3. Sign a donor card and carry it with you.** The HRSA Information Center (ask.hrsa.gov/detail.cfm?id=HRS00259) has cards available at no cost.
 - 4. Let your family know about your decision to become an organ and tissue donor.** Your family members may be asked for consent for donation or provide information at a time of need.
- Candace Murphy

from living donors, while 6,700 came from deceased donors.

Still, of living donors, spousal living donors are the minority. And when doctors gave Joel and Karen the go-ahead, they joined a select population. While 29 percent of living kidney donors in 2005 were either parent or offspring, 24 percent were siblings and 20 percent were unrelated, only 11 percent of living kidney donors were spouses.

That's just 720 people. In a country with a population of more than 298 million.

Still, Joel and Karen's doctors assured them that success rates between spousal donors were high.

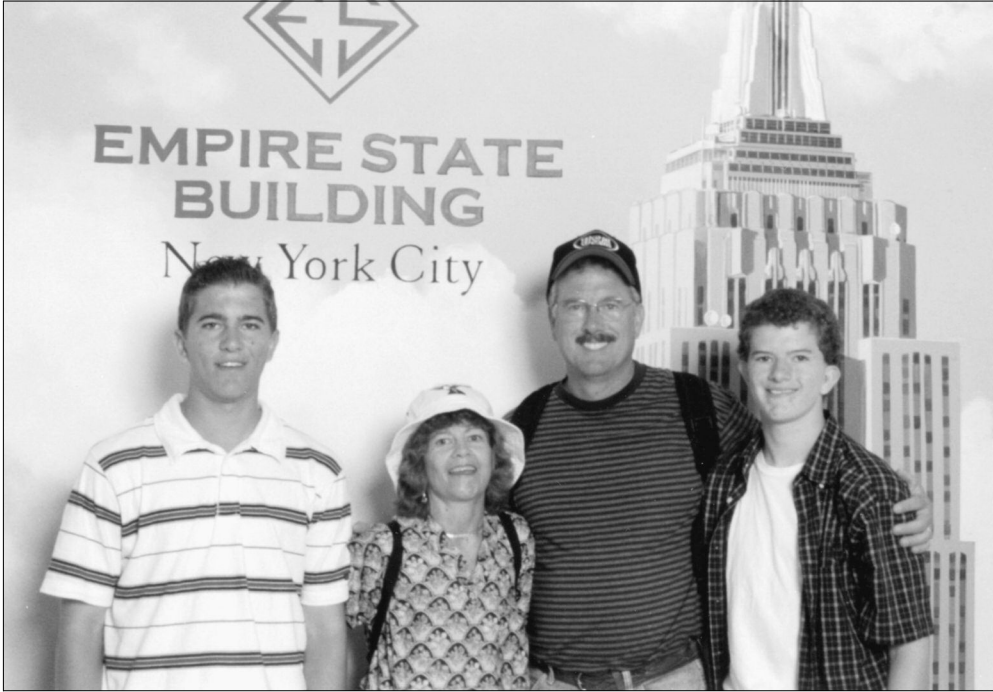
"They said there's something about married couples — the longer you've been together, the

greater success type of thing," says Karen. "The best of course, is if you had a twin, or a sibling. But my husband, I wasn't going to ask. He just stepped up and said he wanted to do it."

Lucky 14

Anyone who knows the Weddicks knows there's this thing about them and the number 14. They met on May 14, 1982. They were engaged on May 14, 1983. They were married on April 14, 1984. They wish each other a happy anniversary every time the day of the calendar turns 14, regardless of the month.

So it's pretty much a given that Karen thinks it's kismet that on surgery day, Joel is in the pre-anesthesia room and lying in Bed 14. On Feb. 14,



Courtesy of the Weddick family

IN THE BIG APPLE: The Weddicks, with sons Matthew (then 17) and Brian (then 15), visited the Empire State Building on a trip to New York City in August, 2004.

She loops her index finger through Joel's identification bracelet and points with her free hand at the stenciled tiles above Joel's gurney.

"Look! It couldn't be more perfect!" says Karen.

"Well, stand up and kiss me, then," says Joel.

Moments later, it's time. As Joel is wheeled out toward the operating room, Karen stands and offers a small wave.

"Bye," she says.

By 1 p.m. on Valentine's Day, Karen had received Joel's kidney. It started working as soon as the doctors hooked it up and by the time Karen was wheeled into recovery, where she was met by Joel's mother,

her entire being was flushed with new life.

"Once Karen got a working kidney, she perked right up," says Joel, who's now at home, finishing up the six weeks of leave he took from work for the surgery. "My mom said that as soon as Karen got back to her room, you could see that her eyes were much brighter than they'd been before."

All is not yet perfect, of course. Karen is on 22 different medications, some of which, over time, will probably be discontinued. And Joel, who's lost 10 pounds, was extremely uncomfortable until his incisions began to heal.

But neither is complaining.

"When Karen and I got married, we gave ourselves to each other spiritually," says Joel. "Now I have given her part of me physically."

It's true love, nods Karen.

"You know, I would have totally understood if he didn't want to do this," says Karen. "He's given me so much already. But we're going to support each other. I'm going to get healthy again and get back on life. It's a steep hill we've climbed together and now we're almost at the top. It'll be a good ride to get over with."

Contact Bay Area Living writer Candace Murphy at cmurphy@ang-newspapers.com or (925) 416-4814.