

Stout Outlook

News for Stout Alumni,
Parents and Friends

Spring 1999
UW-Stout Alumni Association

Ex-roommates top odds by sharing kidneys

Organ donation crosses racial lines, strengthens men's friendship

Serendipity. Providence. Call it what you will.

When Brad Higar '87 and Kevin Harris '86 became roommates at UW-Stout more than a decade ago, it was fortuitous. Little did either young man know that in years to come, one would literally save the life of the other.

Even if they had somehow known that one of them would need a kidney years down the road, what are the odds that the two men, of different races, would be compatible for a kidney transplant procedure? Slim, very slim, according to medical authorities. It is difficult to find compatible donors period. But cross racial donations are even more rare. Whites' organs and Blacks' organs are often incompatible. As one might guess, chances of a match are better between people of the same race, and even then, it is difficult to find suitable matches.

"It's just really very unusual that they would match completely," said Kathy Schappe, transplant coordinator at the University of Wisconsin Hospital Clinics in Madison.

But July 27, 1998, Kevin Harris, a 36-year-old Black manufacturing engineer from St. Paul and Brad Higar, a 34-year-old White contractor from Wausau, (*originally from Rockford, Ill.*) defied the odds, and each underwent surgery, transferring one of Higar's kidneys to Harris.

"To me it was not a huge step," Higar said. "It was a natural step. It's what you would do for a friend, especially if it meant saving that friend's life.

"It was an easy choice for me," Higar added. "There aren't that many people in one's life that you can count on as truly good friends."

The two men became friends while they were roommates at Stout, but they followed their own career paths, and they moved to different cities. The men grew closer over the years, however, as they married (*each stood up in the other's wedding*), started families and enjoyed a shared avid interest in bicycling.

The two began biking together on weekends and doing charity rides and week-long biking

trips. "You do a lot of talking things over during that time," Harris said.

In 1997, the two friends were planning a ride across Oregon and started training for it. "I couldn't seem to get into the training though," Harris said. "I felt lousy, like I had the flu all the time."

The trip was scheduled for August but when Kevin still wasn't feeling well in late June, his wife, Kate, urged him to go to a doctor. He was diagnosed with prostate infection. He continued to go downhill, however and was in excruciating pain. The diagnosis was changed: acute kidney failure.

When this strapping young father of two, in great shape from biking and working out, was diagnosed with kidney failure, "it was unbelievable and devastating," Kate said. "We were told that his kidneys were literally shriveling up and shutting down."

Harris was put on dialysis while awaiting a kidney, although no one knew how long it would be before a compatible kidney would turn up. No one in Kevin's family could donate because of a variety of medical problems and conditions which prohibited them from being donors. "They told me that as an African American, it could be up to a five-year wait," Harris said, if indeed then. "There are fewer Black donors," he said, adding also that only the top 5 percent of potential donors are chosen because they have to be in very fit condition to donate.

When Harris described his situation to Higar, his friend's first response was to ask if he could donate. "Lots of people ask what they can do to help," Harris said, "but how many would offer one of their own kidneys?"

Harris was touched but explained that it would be highly unlikely that Brad would be a match. Higar, however, was eager to start the testing which included not only physical tests but psychological testing and counseling. It was explained that there must be a strong emotional bond, and it must be determined if the would-be



Brad Higar (left) and Kevin Harris are pictured here at Harris' wedding.

donor is strong and stable and giving for the right reasons. Brad passed with flying colors, and he was ready to begin the physical testing.

Higar attached *one* string to the venture, however. If he was found to be compatible, he would donate a kidney *only* with a promise from Kevin that he would treat Brad no differently than before. "I didn't want the friendship to change," Higar said. "I didn't want him to feel like he owed me anything. I just wanted him to still treat me like a jerk if I'm acting like one."

But as anyone can imagine, the friendship *is* at a different level. The two men are linked forever, not just by an organ that once functioned in the other's body, but at a "deeper, gut level," Harris said.

The procedure, performed at Hennepin County Medical Center, was an example of a new laparoscopic technique that HCMC surgeons have been using only since January of 1998 in which the recovery period is dramatically reduced. Kevin described his surprise at being wheeled

out of the recovery room after receiving his new kidney and finding Brad standing next to him and walking with him to his room.

The story has attracted wide media attention. It was featured on a Twin Cities TV show and was picked up by the Associated Press. The two friends were flown to New York for an appearance on "Good Morning America."

"I still haven't been able to express to Brad what I really feel," Harris said. Each phone call is still emotional for Kevin and Kate. "Brad is such an honest, genuine human being who really cares," Harris said of his friend. "You don't find that very often."

Brad and his wife Cathy (*Terkelson*) '87 are both graduates of Stout. "I am just an average Stout graduate," Brad said. Many people wouldn't agree with that, especially Kevin Harris.

"I feel extremely unworthy of such a gift," Harris said.

Gift indeed. One that came without a bow but wrapped in unusual love.

The People Process Culture

Management culture being studied
and taught at university.

Page 2

Grand Sound From Bowman Bells

Class reunions challenged to
raise funds for project.

Page 4

Alumni Board Changes

Board welcomes four new members,
recognizes contributions of those leaving.

Page 10