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People

**SANDRA
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HOW LOVE CHANGED MY LIFE

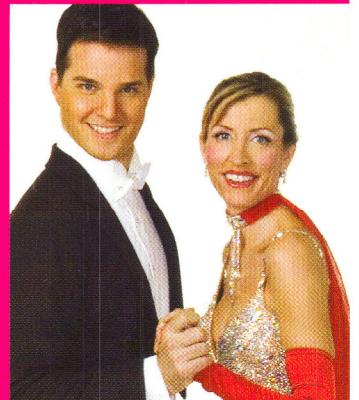
The *Premonition* star opens up about marriage to Jesse James, those pregnancy rumors, her 'amazing' stepchildren and helping Katrina's kids. 'I feel really lucky'



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Wedding Album



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HEATHER MILLS
Dancing's New Stars

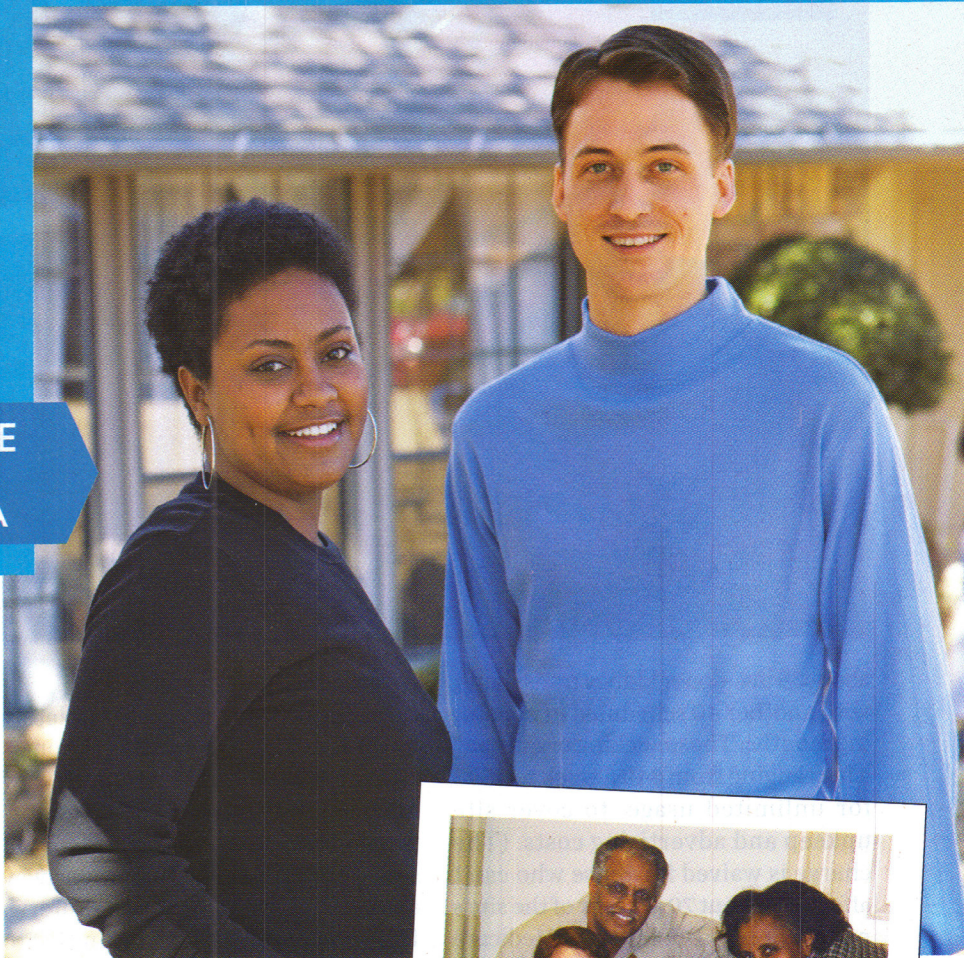


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KIDNEYS ONLINE

TURNING TO THE INTERNET—AND THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS—HAS HELPED DOZENS IN NEED OF ORGANS GAIN A NEW LEASE ON LIFE **BY MARISA WONG**

RAHWA DANIEL USED THE WEB TO FIND ORGAN DONOR JACOB HALUPKA



For weeks Rahwa Daniel counted the numbers until her new kidney arrived: eight more dialysis sessions, 12 more pills to swallow, three more days of nausea and fatigue. Diagnosed with kidney failure two years ago, the pain and uncertainty of emergency room visits and thrice-weekly blood-cleansing appointments were taking their toll. “I’m weak and tired a lot,” the 22-year-old Texan said. “I don’t know that I could emotionally handle feeling bad for more years.”

Soon she wouldn’t have to. One of 95,000 people who may have to wait as long as 10 years for a new kidney via the federal government’s United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS) list, Daniel found a new organ in an unconventional way: She went online. MatchingDonors.com, a two-year-old non-profit Web site, connects those in need of healthy body organs with people ready to donate them. And while some experts worry the site could facilitate the illegal sale of organs or provide an unfair advantage over those without access to computers, for Daniel it was a blessing. Seven months after discovering MatchingDonors.com at her dialysis center, she connected with Jacob Halupka, a 29-year-old cook and father

of three from Lebanon, Ind., and made a match. “I’m excited to start living again,” she said from her Arlington, Texas, home, a few days before the operation. “I’m ready to be energetic and laugh. I feel like my life has been on pause for the past two years.”

Her long, lethargic days in bed contrasted with her earlier life as a University of Texas at Arlington premed student who enjoyed tennis and swimming. In February 2005, halfway through her sophomore year, Daniel was rushed to the hospital after a weekend-long vomiting spell. Doctors said she had a rare disease that attacked her filtering system, and her kidneys were only functioning at 6 per-



“Jacob is my angel,” says Daniel (in the hospital the day after her Feb. 19 surgery, with Halupka and her parents).

cent. Within a year she was put on dialysis, which made her weak and caused her to drop out of school. A seizure led to two weeks on a breathing machine. Says Daniel: “I thought I was facing death.”

While at a dialysis session, Daniel noticed an article about MatchingDonors.com, launched in 2004 by Dr. Jeremiah Lowney of New England Baptist Hospital and Paul Dooley. Site officials say it has successfully brought

"I'm so grateful that I have this extension on my life," says Fink (with Uribe on Feb. 18).



FIRST JUAN URIBE GAVE GAIL FINK A KIDNEY. THEN HIS WIFE AGREED TO BECOME HER SURROGATE

about 39 live-donor kidney transplants, with another 40 scheduled in upcoming months. Those seeking organs pay a fee ranging from \$49 a week to \$595 for unlimited usage, to cover site upkeep and advertising costs. (The charge is waived for those who can't afford it—about 70 percent of the site's members, says Dooley—and Medicare has approved reimbursement for services like MatchingDonors.) Potential donors can surf their Web pages for free.

After seeing a flyer seeking bone-marrow donors, Jacob Halupka researched the topic on the Web, found the site—which also matches pancreas, lung and liver transplants—and began scanning patient profiles. He was hooked. "I thought it was a calling," he says. "It's difficult to read these stories and not want to help." So he listed his phone number and took the first three calls he got from organ seekers—including Rahwa Daniel. After talking to her on the phone and discussing the transplant prospects with his priest and his baffled wife, Tina—"It struck me as off the wall; I'm worried," she said—he decided to test to determine if he was a good match. His costs were

covered by Daniel's insurance.

The downside? "It is a completely unregulated system," says Dr. Thomas Diflo, a transplant surgeon at NYU Medical Center, which, like many hospitals, bans organ donations from strangers. (Halupka was turned away as a donor by two transplant centers.) Diflo prefers the UNOS waiting list to avoid the potential for fraud or favoritism. But even Dr. Francis Delmonico, the immediate past-president of UNOS, says he would recommend MatchingDonors as an alternative to the government program. "I believe genuinely that those guys are trying to do good by patients," he says.

Gail Fink, 47, a former marketer from a Chicago suburb, will swear by that. She met her donor, Juan Uribe, 43, a car salesman from Cleveland,

“You're a blessing to be a blessing unto others”—organ donor Juan Uribe

Tenn., on the site. They underwent the transplant procedure in April 2005. "I believe that if you do something good for someone it comes back to you," says Uribe, who is also a minister. "You're a blessing to be a blessing unto others." The generosity did not stop there. After the transplant, Fink, who had made three unsuccessful attempts at having a baby via in vitro fertilization, and her husband, Michael, decided to search for a surrogate mother to bear their child. Uribe's wife, Leigh Anne, volunteered for the job. "I wouldn't have thought the kidney donation would make such a connection, but it keeps playing out in such a greater way," says Leigh Anne, who is due in the fall and already has three children of her own with Juan. Already, the Uribe kids call the Finks auntie and uncle. Says Fink: "It's just such unconditional love."

Back in Texas, Daniel knows the feeling. "What do you say to someone who donates their kidney to you—'Gee, thanks'?" she says. "There's no way to express it." But Halupka can sense the gratitude without words. Two days after her Feb. 19 transplant, Daniel said, "I feel like a whole new person," with newfound excitement in her voice. Says Halupka, whose surgery also went smoothly: "She's smiling. There's just a glow she didn't have before."

COURTESY/LEIGH ANNE URIBE