

GIFT OF A lifetime

Sisters bound by transplant

By Gary Bass
STAFF WRITER

After the early Christmas present Paula Swopo gave her sister, Karen Dunbar, on Nov. 3, 1998, the presents under the tree this year might be a little anti-climactic.

A little over a year ago, Paula, 48, donated one of her kidneys to Karen — who was diagnosed with a hereditary disorder called polycystic kidney disease (PKD). Before the successful transplant operation, Karen's kidneys had been operating at 10-15 percent capacity.

"Thanks to her sister's selfless gift, Karen's kidneys are now operating at full capacity once again.

"No matter what (Paula) says, I'll always be indebted to her," said Karen, 46, in a rare serious moment during an interview at her home in Shady Oaks. "There's nothing you can really do to repay someone for that kind of gift."

"I think she felt better right away," said Paula, a resident of Cross Roads, with a glance at her sister. "The doctors said her color came back while she was still on



Time is much more precious for sisters Paula Swopo of Cross Roads (left) and Karen Dunbar of Shady Oaks. Last year, Swopo gave her sister an early Christmas present. Swopo donated a kid-

ney to Dunbar — who has been diagnosed with polycystic kidney disease — on Nov. 3, 1998. Both women are doing well following the transplant.

ROBBY ROBERTSON/ADAMS REVIEW

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the table.

"On the other hand, I woke up sick as a dog and I hurt in places I didn't know existed," added Paula. "After the operation, (Karen) came into my room with a big grin on her face. The first thing she said to me was, 'I'm hungry.'"

With Christmas lights blinking merrily in the living room and a stack of brightly wrapped presents under the tree, the two women acted like typical close-knit siblings as they sat around Karen's dining room table discussing the last year of their lives.

Laughter filled the room as Paula and Karen teased and joked with each other. During the interview, the sisters' husbands — Richard Ratley Sr. and Dave Dunbar, along with Karen's two children, Megan and Will — wandered through on their way to the back yard or the kitchen, occasionally putting their two-cents in or laughing at the sisters' antics.

One might even say Karen has been given a new lease on life since the transplant. The vivacious and petite mother of two, sitting at the table trading good-natured barbs with her older sister, is almost as different as night and day from the Karen who went under the knife in November 1996.

Before the operation, the cysts formed on Karen's kidneys as a result of PKD were causing waste products to build up in her bloodstream.

That build-up of waste products led to a condition called uremic poisoning, which left Karen feeling chronically fatigued and worn out. Paula said during the eight-weeks prior to the operation, her sister had not made it through a single week of work at Argon Medical.

"PKD patients feel tired and lethargic. It also makes them anemic," said then-transplant coordinator Beth Martin just prior to the operation. "I don't see how she managed working full-time and raising two kids."

On the morning of Nov. 3, 1998,

Paula — who was almost a perfect match as an organ donor — went into the operating room at East Texas Medical Center Tyler about an hour ahead of her younger sister.

A surgeon made an incision in her side and removed her left kidney. Following the removal of the organ, the doctor tied off blood vessels and stitched her back up.

"Before the operation, I almost left," said Paula. "I was scared out of my mind. I mean, I was going to go into surgery healthy and come out unhealthy — that's normally not the way it's supposed to work."

"After the operation, the doctor told me the procedure was comparable to open-heart surgery," she added with a rueful grin. "I told him that I wished he'd told me that before the operation."

Paula explained the doctor told her that, in some cases, the surgeon was forced to remove one of the patient's lower ribs to get at the kidney.

"Boy, am I glad he didn't have to take that rib out," she said.

"Going into it, my biggest fear was that it wouldn't work," said Karen. "If it hadn't worked, we would have gone through it all for nothing."

Each of the two women had their own team of doctors and nurses. While Paula's operation lasted three hours, Karen's transplant was completed within two hours and was considerably less involved.

Because the plan called for Karen's existing set of kidneys to be left in place, the doctor placed the transplanted kidney at the front of her lower abdomen.

In addition to the fact their immediate family members were at the hospital to give their love and support, Paula and Karen agreed that one of the most memorable things about their stay was the fact that their mom and dad made the long trip from Indiana.

The sisters' mother also suffers from PKD and has been on dialysis for the past 17 years.

"She stayed in my room all night

that first night," said Karen. "And she's not really healthy enough to be doing that."

Both women said they had friends in several area churches praying for them while they were undergoing the operation.

"It was really wonderful to see how several churches worked together on our behalf," said Karen.

"It had to have helped," put in her sister.

The initial hurdle after the operation was the first 24 hours. Doctors watched Karen closely during that period to make sure her body didn't reject the new kidney.

Both women were released from the hospital within three days of the operation — which doctors said was a new record for a kidney transplant.

Jokingly, Paula said her sister was so swollen that she looked five months pregnant for weeks after the operation.

During the interview, Paula pulled up her sweater slightly to proudly display her badge of honor — a 5- or 6-inch scar on her left side. She then teasingly made reference to her little sister's "itty bitty scar" which they said was about an inch long.

"Well, I had a better doctor," shot back Karen with a grin. "And I can still wear a bikini. Ha ha ha."

According to Paula, the transplant operation is much tougher on the donor than the recipient. She added that she was on pain medication for weeks after the procedure. For her part, Karen said she took one and a half pain pills when she

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Beginning Thursday, J
Athens Daily Review
Calendar each issue, c
primary election on Mar
be listed for respective
as they sign up. D

MAN ON THE MOON
(12:30 - 2:30 - 4:30) 7:00 - 9:30
27 Nov. 7 o'clock show No Ties

GREEN HILL
(12:30-2:30) 7:10
27 Nov. 7 o'clock show No Ties No Pines

STUART LITTLE
(11:30 - 2:00 - 4:30) 7:00 - 9:30
27 Nov. 7 o'clock show No Ties

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d got home from the hospital and that
o was it.

d Karen said to avoid possible in-
s fections, she wore a surgical mask
e for the two month period after the
a operation. While she was back be-
hind the wheel of her car within a
month, Karen didn't return to work
at Argon for two months.

1 Conversely, it took Paula three
months to get back to her normal
routine. She added she couldn't
walk, drive her car or ride her hors-
es for most of that time.

"What really made me mad was
when the doctor told Karen she
could ride horses before I could,"
said the older sister with a mock-
frown.

During the interview, the women
explained transplanted kidneys
normally last 10 to 20 years before
the donor's body finally rejects the
organ. Even so, Paula said there is a
chance Karen will keep the kidney
for the rest of her natural life.

While the operation didn't really
strengthen the already strong bond
between the two sisters, Paula did
say her sister is more outgoing and
talkative these days. They also said
there wasn't much truth to the ur-
ban myths the recipient often picks
up character traits associated with
the donor.

"I take that back," said Paula
with a teasing grin. "She did get
mouthier and I know she got that
from me.

"Before the operation, she just
didn't care — she was too tired,"
added Paula. "Now, it's not any fun
to mess with her, because she mess-
es back."