

THE BALTIMORE BANNER

She needed a kidney transplant. Then a familiar face emerged.

Anna Rubenstein

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Alison Bucklin, left, and Lori Raxenberg at Patterson Park Public Charter School in Baltimore. (Courtesy of Alison Bucklin)

At just over one week until surgery, Lori Raxenberg focused on getting the house ready, hoping a new kidney would lead to a future when cleaning a room wouldn't deplete her for the day. She had asked a neighbor to move her car on street cleaning days and was anxiously awaiting her mom, who was flying in on a one-way ticket from New York.

For a successful living kidney transplant, donor and recipient have to match up on a lot of things — blood type, tissue type, a day in the same hospital to transfer the kidney from one body to the other.

But not personality. When it comes to that, Raxenberg and her donor, Alison Bucklin, couldn't be more different.

"She is, like, the most positive person you could ever meet," Raxenberg said of Bucklin, while sitting in her dimly lit rowhome in Patterson Park. "I am probably the most negative person you could ever meet."

On Thursday morning, the two women arrived at the University of Maryland Medical Center for their surgery. It's been a long time coming for the two, who met during the summer of 2022 at Patterson Park Public Charter School.

It's a gift

Kidneys are the most commonly transplanted organs in the United States and the most sought after, leaving a huge gap between supply and demand.



Bucklin and Raxenberg at a fundraiser for Donate Life Maryland in 2024. (Courtesy of Alison Bucklin)

The benefits of receiving a kidney from a living donor can't be understated. The organs often last longer and work faster, and the donors can bring a kidney to someone who might otherwise spend over five years on a waiting list [that might not even prioritize the sickest patients.](#) Oftentimes, donors are family, spouses or close friends, but a small percentage are considered

“altruistic,” people who come forward without previously knowing the recipient.

The two women fell somewhere in the middle. Bucklin was Raxenberg’s paraeducator in her pre-K classroom during the 2022-23 school year. They immediately connected over a shared love of animals and grew close through managing a chaotic classroom.

It was that year that they began to assume their roles: Raxenberg as the “anything that can go wrong will go wrong” mind and Bucklin encouraging her to “focus on what’s in our control.” Raxenberg, who privately battled polycystic kidney disease she was diagnosed with about 20 years ago, set up a stuffed animal rescue drive for the kids and even brought in Baltimore Ravens offensive tackle Ronnie Stanley and one of his foundation’s dogs.

“She gives everything to the students,” said Bucklin, who was new to teaching, entering education later in her career. “I just learned so much.”

After a year working with Bucklin, Raxenberg, who spent a dozen years at the Patterson Park school and founded its pre-K class, moved to Lakeland Elementary. Bucklin entered her next classroom in September 2023.

Raxenberg’s disease was worsening. By the next summer, it was time to start considering getting listed for a transplant so she could avoid dialysis, a treatment that saves lives but takes a toll on the body.

Social media has become a crucial part of connecting kidney donors and recipients, but Raxenberg didn't want to put herself out there. She hated the idea of people looking at her differently in public.

But then people started reaching out, offering to get tested. Friends would tell her they saw her bumper stickers seeking a donor on cars driving by, or her flyers hanging at CVS.

"It's hard to be so public about needing something," said Dr. Terry Watnick, Raxenberg's nephrologist at the University of Maryland Medical System. "But the truth is there are so many people out there."

Raxenberg and Bucklin weren't best friends or even in much contact. But they followed each other on Facebook. Bucklin said she saw the post in which Raxenberg shared she needed a donor and had a feeling in her subconscious. It took time for her consciousness to catch up: over six months to send in the paperwork after she initially reached out to Raxenberg expressing interest in helping. Life moved fast and fear got in the way, but the signs kept pulling her back.

"The next thing in my life that I'm supposed to do is help her with this," said Bucklin, who's a big believer in following the signs.

She's gonna get a good kidney

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After filling out the initial paperwork, Bucklin went through months of testing: blood tests, urine tests, chest X-rays and CT scans. The final step was going before a committee, which gave her a clean bill of health and signed off on the match in April.

Particularly in nonfamilial situations, hospitals keep recipients in the dark about their donors, so the person has the option to back out at any time. Sitting in a hot tub in Colorado, she immediately called Raxenberg.

“I could just picture her on the phone. We just both sat there; nobody said anything,” Raxenberg said. After 20 years since her diagnosis, she had learned to be wary alongside her relief. She said she still has her kidney donor magnet on her car and won’t consider taking it off until she leaves the surgery room.

Bucklin picked a date for the surgery, and the countdown began. Both women wanted to finish the school year. Raxenberg pushed to attend field trips and the end-of-year carnival, eating ice chips as she fought brain fog and fatigue in the heat. Bucklin went on a family vacation to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, leaving the rest of the summer following surgery for recovery.

Donors typically stay no longer than two days in the hospital, while recipients need about a week. Similarly, recovery looks different. Donors have a more typical

postsurgery recovery, advised to take it easy and avoid heavy lifting, while recipients see their daily routines change. Raxenberg will be getting both her kidneys removed, meaning a longer recovery time.

Both women are looking at the moment as before transplant, and after.

“My hope is just to have energy back — just to be able to feel more myself,” Raxenberg said. “But it’s the fear of the unknown, because a lot of the medications that I’ll be on are gonna make things harder, and some take a lot of regulating.”

But there’s one thing she’s confident in: the kidney itself.

“Not just a heart of gold, but she’s probably the healthiest person I know,” she said of Bucklin. “It’s gonna be, like, the perfect kidney.”

And maybe she’ll get some of her positivity, too.

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