

More Than Coffee Talk

For 25 years, NTAF has helped transplant patients pay for critical but uninsured medical expenses related to transplantation

Each morning for more than three years, five days a week, Annamarie Ausnes, 55, stopped at the Proctor Starbucks in Tacoma, Wash., on her way to work at the University of Puget Sound.

She placed the same order each time—a short drip, double-cupped coffee for \$1.52.

Starbucks barista Sandie Andersen, 52, often had Annamarie's order poured before she even reached the counter. Sandie took notice of the frequent customer because of her upbeat personality and unusual method of payment—she'd always pay with change.

"It was my routine to take it off my husband's dresser, where he would leave his loose change," Annamarie explained.

Annamarie's daily routine of counting coins bought the two women extra time to exchange conversation over the counter. They had much in common—grandchildren and a taste for travel to sunny spots—away from Washington's rain.

Although the two women chatted nearly every day for years, they did not know one another's name until last November.

One morning, Sandie noticed that Annamarie was not her usual self when she arrived for her morning coffee. Sandie asked what was wrong.

Though hesitant at first to talk about her medical needs, Annamarie told Sandie what was going on, and why that morning she wasn't her usual upbeat self.

FACED WITH DIALYSIS, TRANSPLANT

Annamarie explained that she'd just been placed on the kidney transplant waiting list, where candidates can wait, on dialysis, for years.

She'd discovered back in 1990 that she had polycystic kidney disease (PKD). Her kidneys now were failing, she explained, and she needed a transplant. No one in her family was a match.

"Sandie threw her hands up in the air at that moment and said, 'I am going to test for you.'"

"It was that instantaneous," Annamarie added.

"My only thought," Sandie said, "was that I could relate to this woman. I, too, have grandkids and a family that counts on me. I can help!"

"I told her I had been praying for an angel," Annamarie said, "and then she said, 'Maybe I am your angel.'"

The following week, Sandie found out she was a match. After discussing it with her family, Sandie decided to share the good news with Annamarie.

"There was a line all the way to the door—and here comes Annamarie," Sandie remembered.

"Talk about time stopping! I grabbed her hand and said, 'I'm a match.' We both started to cry."

HOW NTAF HELPED

On March 11, the two Tacoma women underwent transplant surgery at Virginia Mason Hospital in Seattle—sparking a nationwide media buzz about the charitable Starbucks barista from Tacoma.

After her transplant, Annamarie devoted some of her newfound energy to raising the money to pay for the medical expenses she and her donor incurred during their surgeries. Although Annamarie had health insurance, she still owed thousands of dollars—and she also wanted to make sure her beneficent donor didn't have any out-of-pocket expenses during her recovery.

That's where the National Transplant Assistant Fund (NTAF) came in.

NTAF helps patients and their families mobilize their communities to raise funds for uninsured medical expenses related to transplantation and catastrophic injury (see sidebar).

Annamarie chose to raise funds with NTAF because it provides tax-deductibility and fiscal accountability for her contributors. Contributors can be sure, she said, that funds contributed will be used to pay or reimburse only medically related expenses.



Kidney recipient Annamarie Ausnes (right) and her living kidney donor Sandie Anderson. Both recipient and donor were helped with their medical expenses by the National Transplant Assistance Fund, which this year celebrates its 25th anniversary.

HELPING THE DONOR

The fund-raiser was held at the University of Puget Sound, where Annamarie works, and the event raised more than \$15,000. The amount was sufficient to cover donor Sandie's expenses while she was away from work during her eight-week recovery.


"Sandie and her husband were extremely impressed how promptly the NTAF forwarded reimbursement checks to them," Annamarie said.

Both Annamarie and Sandie are continuing to recover well and are glad to have shared the experience. Both are back at work.

"I haven't had this much energy in the last five years," Annamarie said. "People who know me even say they can hear the energy back in my voice."

Both women say they gained "new life" from the entire experience.

"I'm the one that received so much more than I gave," Sandie said. "You can't know that until you experience it. Annamarie has taken me on a journey that changed my life for the better, forever.

"It's humanity at its finest," she added, "and I got to be part of it." 

Special thanks to Shannon McMonagle, communications coordinator at the National Transplant Assistance Fund, who wrote the original article upon which this Update article was based—and for her gracious assistance in gathering additional information to bring the content up to date.

NTAF'S ONGOING LEGACY

The National Transplant Assistance Fund (NTAF) is a nonprofit organization that assists patients in fund raising for their uninsured medical expenses. Those who are helped include transplant candidates and recipients, and individuals living with catastrophic injury (spinal cord injury, brain trauma and burns).

- Since its inception 25 years ago, NTAF has helped patients **raise more than \$57 million** for critical medical care, otherwise unaffordable. Additionally, NTAF has provided direct financial assistance to 3,197 patients.
- In the last 10 years alone, NTAF has provided information, assistance and referrals to 16,661 patients, sometimes administering as many as 1,400 fund-raising campaigns at a time.
- In fiscal year 2008, NTAF helped patients raise more than \$7.2 million and disbursed \$5.6 million for patients' medical expenses.
- This year NTAF earned the highest possible rating from three national charity evaluators for high standards of public accountability and program effectiveness.
- NTAF offers a variety of fund-raising services, including personalized appeal letters, customized fliers and other materials to publicize events, patient webpages on the NTAF website for electronic fund raising, and much more.
- NTAF (originally called the National Heart Assist and Transplant Fund) was founded in 1983 by Jack Kolff, M.D., and his wife, Patricia Kolff, B.S.N., after Dr. Kolff witnessed, firsthand, patients being turned down for heart transplantation due to lack of financial resources.
- Dr. Kolff established the heart transplant program at Temple University Hospital in Philadelphia. He served as board chair until June 2008, and Patricia Kolff served as NTAF executive director from 1983 to 2003 and as NTAF board vice chair until June 2008.

 Visit transplantfund.org or call 1-800-642-8399 for more information.