

Renewal helps save lives...one kidney at a time

Sheri Shefa
Staff Reporter

The idea of elective surgery often conjures images of people with nose jobs, facelifts and implants.

But kidney donor John Anhang is hoping to recruit people to consider elective surgery for a totally different – and more rewarding – reason: to save a life.

Anhang, founder of the Toronto chapter of Renewal – a New York-based organization that works within the Jewish community to find kidney donors and facilitate transplants – spoke at the Village Shul last week to promote the organization, share his personal donation story, and to inspire others to follow in his footsteps.

"I've been blessed in life with excellent health... I wanted to thank the Almighty for

good health... in a tangible way," he said.

If a person is wealthy, he donates money to charity, he explained.

"It occurred to me that if God has blessed me with good health, there is a physical way to share that health with someone else."

He explained that once someone is diagnosed with kidney disease, kidney failure is inevitable. While a patient is waiting for a possible match, a patient must go on dialysis, which can result in other complications, and is only a temporary solution to a terminal disease.

After deciding that he wanted to donate a kidney, Anhang came across a newspaper ad about a man in need of a transplant, and immediately contacted Renewal, which was handling the logistics of the case.

Anhang later learned that the man in need was Eitan Yefenof, a Hebrew University

professor and cancer researcher, who was suffering from polycystic kidney disease.

After flying in and out of New York to complete a series of tests at the Mount Sinai Medical Center to ensure that he was in the peak of health, and after doctors were confident Yefenof did not have antibodies in his blood that would reject Anhang's kidney, the date was set for the transplant.

During one of Anhang's New York visits, he was asked by the Renewal liaison if he wanted to meet Yefenof.

Anhang agreed, but recalled that the meeting "was awkward, because what could he say to me? Thank you? You say thank you to someone who holds open the door for you or lends you \$5."

Following months of flying back and forth from Toronto to New York, the day of the operation finally arrived.

Anhang and Yefenof, each accompanied by their wives, found themselves in yet another awkward meeting early that morning when they were shuttled from their hotel to the hospital.

"We were all nervous, I guess, and it was very tense. What do you say? I wanted to say something to break the ice, so I said, half to myself and half to Eitan, 'You know, I'm really glad I'm doing this, and I'm really glad I'm donating it to you.' At the time, he didn't say much, but evidently it made a big impact on him because he's quoted that sentence in a number of talks he's given since then," Anhang said.

When Anhang was brought to the pre-op room, which is essentially a waiting area for people in line for surgery, he "was probably the only healthy person sitting there. I had an amazing sense that I was there to do something," he said.

Addressing the common misconception that organ donation is forbidden by Jewish law, Anhang, an Orthodox Jew, said, "One of the 613 mitzvot is to save a life. Although Eitan wasn't dying right then and there... ultimately he would die from kidney disease. There is no cure for it."

Anhang's surgery, which was done laparoscopically – through small incisions in the abdomen – was a complete success.

When Anhang was discharged a mere 27 hours later, he popped in to Yefenof's room to check how he was recovering.

"It was incredible. He was sitting in his bed on his laptop, working, and he said he hadn't felt that good in years. The kidney was



John Anhang [Sheri Shefa photo]

working at 100 per cent... That made me feel good," he said.

After about a month of soreness and fatigue, Anhang said he felt completely back to normal.

"If I have one regret, it's that I can only do this once. Every kidney donor I know is thrilled they did it, and they'll tell you that it was one of the most special events in their lives."

Although they live thousands of kilometres apart, the Yefenofs have stayed in touch with the Anhangs, sending them flowers every yom tov and exchanging emails.

In the months that followed the transplant, when Anhang weighed the positive experience of donating a kidney against the inconvenience of having to fly back and forth from Toronto to New York, it occurred to him that Renewal needed a presence in Toronto.

There are almost 200,000 Jews in the GTA, and of them, there are Jews who need a kidney and others who'd be willing to donate, he thought.

In the four years since Renewal Toronto was founded, there have been five successful donations, and there are three more cases that are underway.

"We're here to serve the recipients, but what we really want to do is support donors so that it is as easy and positive experience as possible. Our motto is the donor is king."

There are currently 20 people in Toronto's Jewish community who are desperately seeking a match.

For more information, visit www.life-renewal.org/toronto/index.htm, or call 416-628-7633.