



## Getting a new kidney is 'like starting over'

By Josh Stockinger | Daily Herald Staff

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An image from a television commercial in which Corinne Roche appeared last year to raise awareness about organ and tissue donation in Illinois.

For the last two weeks, Corinne Roche has felt pretty crummy. And she couldn't be happier about it.

The body ache, the numbness in her left leg, the fluctuating blood pressure -- these are the reminders of an organ transplant that might have saved the 18-year-old's life.

"I'm so thankful, I just don't even know where to start," said Roche, of St. Charles. "I feel like this is going to be good, like my life is going to start over."

It was the morning of Oct. 23 when Roche got the phone call she had been awaiting for four years. A nurse told her a kidney matching her blood and body type had been located. Could she get to the hospital right away?

Roche said she nearly collapsed in the parking lot at Elgin Community College, where she is a student, upon hearing the news.

It was only one day before that doctors told the recent St. Charles East High School graduate she likely would wait another four years for a kidney because she turned 18 and was moved from the children's waiting list to the longer list for adults.

Roche immediately dialed her mother, Jeanne, who was equally shocked to hear her daughter's wait was over.

"As long as you're waiting for that call," her mother said, "nothing can prepare you for that day."

Roche, who previously went by the surname Jakubiec, was diagnosed with kidney disease as an infant. She received her first kidney transplant when she was 20 months old.

About four years ago, the condition returned, putting Roche on a rigorous, nightly regiment of dialysis treatment. It required the use of a bulky dialysis machine, which kept Roche anchored near her bed and away from sleepovers with friends.

Meanwhile, Roche turned her attention to spreading the word about changes to rules governing organ and tissue donations in Illinois.

She essentially became a teen spokeswoman for the nonprofit Gift of Hope Organ and Tissue Donation Network, which monitored her wait through television commercials, radio spots and, more recently, a video posted on YouTube.com.

Roche's wait finally ended when doctors recovered a living kidney from a deceased boy who was younger than 18 years old, said Tresa Zielinski, a pediatric nurse practitioner at Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago.

Roche was on the operating table that night.

"It was like time stopped and I was literally swept away," she said. "It was very surreal. Four years of being sick, then eight hours (of surgery), and I'm like back to normal."

Roche spent a day in intensive care before moving to a regular hospital room, then going home about a week later. She initially had some negative side effects while doctors adjusted her medication and as her new kidney "woke up," a term doctors use to describe when a transplanted organ becomes functional.

"I suppose it's just kind of luck of the draw," Zielinski said of the transplant, noting that Roche has an uncommon blood type and there was a chance her body would reject the organ because of her previous transplant.

"When you add all these levels of difficulty, it really makes it a remarkable situation," Zielinski said.

Roche knows little about her donor, but she and her mother will have the chance to write a letter for the boy's relatives to read if and when they choose to do so. But the thought of trying to communicate their gratitude in words is almost unfathomable to the Roche family.

"For me as a parent, I see it from both sides," Jeanne said, looking at her daughter. "A mom has made a decision on the other side, and a mom is sitting here with Corinne."

Roche already has big plans for her new life.

Some dreams are simple: wearing a bikini without showing off an abdominal dialysis hookup, being able to drink water until her thirst is quenched, spending the night with friends. Others are more ambitious.

"I can go to a real college now, a real university," she said. "I can live in a dorm, which wasn't an option before. I can travel.

"The horizon is open."

Roche said her experience with Gift of Hope has led her to consider a career in public speaking or possibly journalism. She plans to continue volunteering to promote organ and tissue donation.

As for her bulky dialysis machine?

"I packed it up the day I got home," she said with a laugh, "and I haven't looked at it since."