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A Perfect Kindness

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E Idonna Edwards , the protagonist of the documentary *Perfect Strangers* , lives in San Luis Obispo, California, which is not only the happiest town in the U.S., but one of the friendliest — at least according to news reports that pick up on this kind of state-of-the-nation data.

In her 50s, Edwards, who goes by the name “Ellie,” seems an embodiment of the state’s reputation for live-and-let-live experimentation. A massage therapist, Edwards does yoga, has blonde hair dyed strawberry pink at the ends, wears ’70s-era clothing, hangs wind chimes outside her house and takes lingering baths in an outdoor tub by candlelight. Superficially, she fits a certain stereotype of a West Coast free spirit, a transplant from Michigan drawn to the follow-your-bliss liberality of California. But in Edwards’ case, follow-your-bliss meant doing something remarkable for someone she didn’t know, a perfect stranger.

Directed by Jan Krawitz, *Perfect Strangers* will be shown free of charge at 7 p.m. Wednesday at the Loew Theater at the Black Family Visual Arts Center in Hanover. A Q&A session with Krawitz will follow.

The screening is co-sponsored by Dartmouth Film and Media Studies, The Leslie Center for Humanities, and The Ethics Institute. While on campus, Krawitz, who is head of the M.F.A. program in Documentary Film and Video at Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif., will also teach classes.

Perfect Strangers looks at what happened when Edwards decided she wanted to donate one of her kidneys to someone in need of a transplant. It’s not unusual for people to specify that, upon their death, their organs be donated to medicine. Nor is it unusual for family members to be tested in hope that they might be a match for a relative who needs a functioning kidney.

But it is quite rare for someone to volunteer to donate a kidney just because she thinks it’s the right thing to do. Organ donation from a live person involves major surgery, a recovery period, and the risk of something going wrong during the operation, which, in a minuscule percentage of cases, may result in death. But

Edwards is one of those unusual individuals who felt the call to give one of her healthy kidneys to someone whose kidney was failing.

In 2007, Edwards, who'd seen some of Krawitz's documentaries, wrote her suggesting that she make a film about the need in the U.S. for kidney donors. Edwards had met a young woman waiting for a kidney transplant and, moved by her story, had written a research paper for a class at a local community college on the state of kidney donation in this country.

Krawitz has directed nine documentaries on subjects as diverse as women's body image, the lives of people with dwarfism, circuses and the history of drive-in theaters, and has won prestigious awards for her work. She's used to people sending ideas for movies to her over the transom, the old publishing term for unsolicited manuscripts that may or may not be worth anything. Because she prefers to come up with her own subjects and approaches, she initially didn't respond to Edwards' letter, she said in a telephone interview this week from Newport, Calif., where she was attending a conference on international film schools.

But something about Edwards' letter made her reconsider. Krawitz keeps a file of story clippings that have caught her attention, and one of them was a 2004 article in *The New Yorker* about a man who not only gave away all his wealth, but was also a kidney donor.

"It is often an understated catalyst that sparks interest in a topic as a possible film idea, i.e. the films find me rather than the other way around," Krawitz wrote in a follow-up email. "For example, a 'filler' article in a ... newspaper in 1980 about the Mini-Gators, a support group for dwarfs living in Southern Florida set me on the journey that resulted in *Little People* (1984) and *Big Enough*, a revisit to the same topic 20 years later."

In the case of *Perfect Strangers*, the idea of someone performing an act of altruism so far beyond the realm of an everyday good deed fascinated Krawitz.

Why would a person voluntarily donate a kidney when she was under no obligation to do so? What were the ethical considerations? How did you distinguish between someone who decided freely to donate an organ to an anonymous recipient, and someone who might have been experiencing some form of coercion? Was the person doing it out of some warped sense of self-aggrandizement or craving for publicity? Since, in many cases, you can't control who receives your kidney, how would you feel if it went to someone you despised?

The average wait for a new kidney in the U.S. is between three and five years, according to the National Kidney Foundation. More than 96,000 Americans are on waiting lists to receive a new kidney but fewer than 17,000 will receive one each year; and every day 13 people die because they didn't get a kidney in time to save their lives.

So curiosity got the better of Krawitz. She went to meet Edwards in San Luis Obispo and learned that she had already been paired, through the national organization Matching Donors, with Kathy Wheeler, a woman living in Eureka, Calif., near the Oregon border. Wheeler had Polycystic Kidney Disease, which is genetically

inherited, and had been on dialysis for years. Conscious that dialysis was not a long term solution, Wheeler had signed up with Matching Donors; Edwards read her biography online and decided that she wanted to give a kidney to Wheeler. The two had already bonded when Krawitz entered the picture.

When you think about casting, you tend to think about casting actors in feature films, said Krawitz, but in many ways, casting a documentary is just as critical, if not more so. “Can this person carry the story? Are they a compelling protagonist, are they articulate? What kind of self-awareness does this film subject have?” she said.

Edwards met all the criteria, and then some. There were no religious imperatives driving her decision, and no family history of kidney disease. She also had a keen empathy and a vivacious, irreverent demeanor — she’d gladly donate her kidney to anyone, she said, with the possible exception of former Vice President Dick Cheney.

“Edwards was an incredible protagonist ... Her reasons couldn’t be pigeonholed, the viewer couldn’t write her off,” Krawitz said.

Kathy Wheeler, by contrast, was quieter, more subdued, so used to the dialysis routine, said Krawitz, that it might appear as if she couldn’t imagine a life that offered anything else.

After Krawitz met and talked at length with both women and their families, and showed them her work, all parties decided to go ahead. She likens the back-and-forth, and building of trust to “a courtship. You need them to like you, and trust you but it’s a really unbalanced relationship. They don’t know much about me. We’re not there to chat; we don’t meet as equals.”

The only prerequisite is that once people agree to work with Krawitz, they let her do what she has to do without intervention or demands. “Either ...they trust that I’ll go into it with respect, or we don’t go into it,” she said.

Everybody involved in the documentary gave Krawitz extraordinary access, partially because she lets the story tell itself. No talking heads. Instead, she said, she favors an “observational fly on the wall approach.”

Dartmouth film professor and documentary filmmaker Jeffrey Ruoff said of Krawitz that “although Jan typically uses no commentary, whether first- or third-person, her ‘voice’ is an articulate and compassionate one, audible through techniques of editing, juxtaposition and staging. It is what I would call a ‘listening voice,’ faithful at once to the concerns of her subjects and to her own thoughts and feelings.”

Life being what it is, though, once Krawitz began filming in 2008, the story took a twist, and then another twist and another one after that. Everytime Krawitz thought she’d finally finished, something else would happen and she’d have to keep shooting. The result is a film that reflects on how people connect in the most extraordinary ways, in extraordinary situations.

Although she admires Edwards' genuine selflessness, Krawitz knows it's not something she could do herself. "It's a really, really extreme thing to do. I take the middle ground, which is, I'll make a film about it. I think I can make a difference in people's lives."

Most audiences are unlikely, as a result of seeing the documentary, to commit themselves to donating a kidney or part of the liver, Krawitz said. But it was never her intention to sway them toward that end. What she hopes is that viewers reflect on their own potential for doing good in a world that desperately needs it.

"What am I leaving as a legacy of my presence in the world? If one out of every five people think about it, then I've succeeded," Krawitz said.

Perfect Strangers screens Wednesday at 7 p.m. in the Black Family Visual Arts Center at Dartmouth College. A Q&A will follow. For information on the film and Krawitz go perfectstrangersmovie.com.

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