

Making a Perfect Connection

MIKE Mentor Candace Grimm

MIKE Mentor Candace Grimm helps youth at De La Salle North Catholic High School analyze food labels. (*MIKE Program*)

MIKE Program By **MIKE Program**

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When Candace Grimm first heard about a Portland showing of Jan Krawitz's award-winning documentary film, **Perfect Strangers**, she said she nearly jumped off the couch. The film, which follows one woman's efforts to donate a kidney, parallels with Grimm's life. Grimm put it simply, "It's what I'm living through."

Grimm is in the process of donating one of her kidneys to a stranger. For most people, donating a living organ takes a great deal of private contemplation and determination. Grimm, who is 24 years old, said the easy part was the decision to donate. "Since I was little, I remember telling people I wanted to donate," she said. Though Grimm can't point to any moment that propelled her towards such an altruistic goal, she realized she wanted to be involved in health care while she was in seventh grade biology.

"The film came out at a perfect time," said Grimm. "It'll help explain why I'm doing this." Grimm said the telling of her story is as important as donating. "It's more internal to give," she said. "But sharing my story gives me a chance to talk to others."

Grimm passed all her initial tests to determine if she is a viable donor, fitting in appointments between classes at Portland State University (PSU) and mentoring commitment with **MIKE Program**. As a public health major at PSU, she discovered the Portland-based nonprofit MIKE through the university's electronic listing for internships.

"I had hoped to intern with **Donate Life Northwest**, but then I heard about MIKE and it intrigued me," she said. Grimm mentors two small groups of teens at De La Salle North Catholic High School, immersing them into a hands-on health education program that builds leadership skills and awareness about health and chronic disease prevention. MIKE was founded on a mission to guide youth toward healthier lifestyles to avoid the chronic diseases which can ultimately lead to kidney failure.

Once kidneys fail, there are only two options available—undergoing dialysis for the remainder of one's life or receiving a kidney transplant. According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (HHS), a new name is added to an organ waiting list in the U.S. every 10 minutes. 80% of those on the list need a kidney. The Pacific Northwest Transplant Bank counts more than 124,000 Americans needing at least one organ during the month.

For Grimm and the teens she mentors, kidney failure became much more of a reality last week. MIKE sponsors field trips to a dialysis clinic as part of the program to give youth a genuine look into lives of people who have lost kidney function. "It really hit home," Grimm said about the field trip. "The youth were all struck by how real it was—how intense it is."

Grimm described the dismay of one man at the clinic who had made it to the top of the transplant waiting list, only to be denied a kidney because of organ compatibility issues. The amount of time waiting for an organ varies greatly between geographical regions and medical criteria.

Although more than two million Oregonians are currently designated donors, 99 percent having signed up through the Oregon Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), solid organs are only viable for transplant if the individual dies in a hospital setting equipped with the resources to extract organs. Tissue, including skin, bone, heart valves, veins and arteries, along with corneas can survive a bit longer outside a medical setting.

That's why living donors play such a key role in organ donation. There were 54 living donors in Oregon in 2013.

First, an organ donor is tested for suitability—based on health issues. Next, testing for compatibility looks at potential matches in blood type, organ size, medical urgency, immune-system matching and distance between the donor and recipient.

Stephen Rice, program director for Donate Life Northwest, who was instrumental in bringing *Perfect Strangers* to Portland for two showings next week, said that youth play a large part in bringing a new generation to donate. Rice oversees Donate Life Northwest's community outreach, including 250 presentations in high schools across Oregon and Southwest Washington this year.

The organization has created curriculum for both general awareness and a more science-based focus. Through its Go Recycle Yourself program, Donate Life Northwest reached more than 30,000 high school students in 2013. In Oregon, teens can sign up to be a donor through the DMV at age 15 or online at age 13, though legal guardians make final decisions about donating organs for children under the age of 18.

"Youth are very likely to already be designated donors," said Rice. "They want to learn about the behind-the-scenes processes and they want to hear about personal stories." Donate Life Northwest includes a cadre of speakers who are organ donors or organ recipients, telling poignant stories about how organ donation saved lives.

During the *Perfect Strangers* showing at the Hollywood Theatre on November 16, one young man will join in a panel discussion with Director Kravitz after the film. Carlos Aguilar, a 2011 Glencoe High School graduate, received a kidney transplant in 2012. He was fortunate that a family friend was a perfect match.

For populations of color, including African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and Asian Americans, there is far more need than donors. These populations disproportionately experience end-stage organ failure than Caucasians, in that they are more likely to suffer from chronic diseases. The HHS reports that rates for obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes and heart conditions are greater in populations of color. A third of those waiting for a kidney transplant are African Americans.

Yet, these populations are less likely to donate organs. Myths and other misinformation hinder donor designation. Organizations like Donate Life Northwest continue to look for ways to communicate with these populations to

counter misconceptions. One effort is observing a National Donor Sabbath this weekend. Houses of worship across the U.S. are participating in outreach to thank organ donors and encourage others to become donors.

Rice says Donate Life Northwest's high school outreach is vital to getting information directly to parents and other family members year-round. Students take home the information and share it with their family.

Rice is hoping *Perfect Strangers* will also spark interest within the Portland community. As 50,000 designated donors are removed from the donor lists, due to aging and health issues, there is a constant need to add new people to the list.

Rice contacted Kravitz to arrange for the Portland showings. She will participate in panel discussions at both showings. *Perfect Strangers* will show at the Hollywood Theatre on November 16 at 2:00 pm, and at the Legacy Good Samaritan Hospital, Building 2 Auditorium on November 17 at 1:30 pm. Admission to the Hollywood showing is \$5, and the Legacy showing is free.

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