

# VERNON PUBLIC SCHOOLS



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## For immediate release

December 30, 2020

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## Counselor at Vernon Center Middle School Donates Kidney to Save a Life, Urges Others to Consider Becoming Living Organ Donors

**VERNON, Connecticut** – As a counselor at Vernon Center Middle School, Kim Sass is used to regularly giving of herself to help students with the myriad of issues and struggles adolescents face each day.

But it was a billboard that Sass spotted along I-84 that got her thinking about another way she could quite literally give of herself to help another person.

“I remember that there was a woman, a mother from Willington, who put up a billboard for her son,” Sass recalled. “He needed a kidney.”

Mary Kozicki is that mother and she was seeking a living donor to provide a kidney for her son Austin, who since he was a child has struggled with a disease that damaged his kidney. It was now time for a transplant and the wait for a kidney can be years.

Sass thought about the billboard. She is healthy and strong, has no chronic health issues and has participated in marathons and triathlons in the past.

“As everything was happening with COVID, you just more and more give thanks for your health,” Sass said. “I began to think donating a kidney was something I could do and I started looking in to living organ donation.”

*The Vernon Public Schools, in partnership with family and community, is committed to provide a quality education, with high expectations, in a safe environment where all students become independent learners and productive contributors to society.*

Sass contacted Hartford Hospital and in August began the process of becoming a living donor. There were interviews with the transplant coordinator, a social worker, a nephrologist and the surgeon, medical evaluations and testing. She was approved to be a living donor at the end of October.

Sass got word in mid-November that she matched someone who needed a kidney and underwent surgery December 3<sup>rd</sup>.



**Kim Sass**

Sass knows only that her kidney went to a child. She's curious about who the person is and what condition the recipient has been enduring. In the end, Sass returns to what motivated her to become a donor in the first place – her good fortune of being a healthy person and her belief she could help someone.

“I don't know who got my kidney, but I do know that if they were on the transplant list their life was being dramatically affected,” Sass said. “If I can function with one kidney, I'm walking around with something someone else needs to live a normal life.”

That the recipient of her kidney was a child makes Sass wonder whether he or she can now go outside and play, go to school and live a life untethered to hospitals and machines.

“I think it's kind of neat that I can do something that has such a dramatic impact on someone's life,” she said.

Sass said she hopes others will consider becoming living donors. It's rewarding and safe for the donor and life-changing for the recipient, she said.

Kozicki, whose billboard inspired Sass, said she was delighted to learn of Sass's decision. It's the third donation Kozicki said she knows of resulting from a person seeing the billboard.

Her son Austin did find a donor and received a kidney and is doing well, she added.

“The Living Donation program at Hartford Hospital is such an amazing program that I never knew existed,” Kozicki said. “Our family, we just don't have the ability to be donors and I thought we were going to be on the list forever.”

Kozicki said she was glad to be able to spread the word about the living donation and to build awareness and to encourage others to consider donating.

“I felt very strongly it wasn't just about Austin's need for a kidney, but raising awareness about the need for kidney donors and awareness of the living donor program,” she said. “It is so easy to save someone's life. Not only Austin's life was saved but other peoples' lives were saved. To be a small part of spreading the word, that feels amazing.”

Sass views her experience as a living donor the same way. Although she was reluctant to speak publicly about donating a kidney, she decided it was important to spread the word and to encourage others to consider being a living donor because the need is so great.

“In my job I have to be an advocate for kids,” Sass said. “If I’m doing this and I have a good experience, I think my job right now is to advocate for people to be living donors.”

To David Caruso, the principal at Vernon Center Middle School, Sass’s decision to be a living donor provides an example to students at VCMS and throughout the Vernon Public Schools.

“We talk about our core values all the time and what it means to be a good person and to help people,” Caruso said. “It exemplifies what we value at Vernon Center Middle School and in the Vernon community, the giving of one’s self to help others. Educators are doing that every single day. Kim just found a different way to do it.”

Kari Rancourt, a nurse and transplant coordinator at Hartford Hospital, said there are 388 people waiting for a kidney transplant through Hartford Hospital’s transplant program, and the number grows each year. Nationally, about 100,000 people are waiting for a transplant and about 20,000 transplant surgeries occur, she said.

“The problem with kidney disease is it’s not super visible,” Rancourt said. “People don’t truly understand how life-saving a donation can be. This really is a life-changing and life-saving gift.”

People who are organ donors at death help, but only three out of 1,000 people die in a way that allows for organ donation, Rancourt said. That makes living donors crucial.

Sass was unusual in that she was a non-directed donor, meaning she volunteered without a specific recipient in mind. It’s rare for the transplant program to hear from people interested in such a donation, but Rancourt said she’d love to hear from more.

“Non-directed donors are very special people,” she said. “For the person who is moved to do this, they’re moved by some bigger calling and they are definitely part of an amazing group of people.”

The process is voluntary and donors can change their minds at any time, Rancourt said. All of a donor’s medical costs related to the donation are covered, she added.

“There’s no greater gift you can give than the gift of life,” Rancourt said.

For more information about the Living Donor program at Hartford Hospital, please call 860-696-2021 or visit:

<https://hartfordhospital.org/services/transplant-services/departments-services/living-donation>

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