The man who can't stop giving

Multimillionaire Zell Kravinsky stole away to a hospital this summer to donate one of his kidneys to a stranger. For the right recipient, he tells Philadelphia *magazine's Jason Fagone, he's willing to part with the other.*

Kravinsky: Still welcoming random requests for cash

After word got out that one of Philadelphia's most eccentric millionaires had donated a kidney to a random stranger, a reporter at one of America's most prestigious newspapers was sent to interview him. What the reporter found wasn't a magnate in pinstripes, but a morose guy wearing a thrift-store shirt. What happened next is the reason the reporter insists that his name and his newspaper stay secret—because within a few hours, the so-called nutcase, Zell Kravinsky, had persuaded the reporter to sign a contract that required him to donate his kidney. Zell would pay him, or a charity of his choosing, $10,000 ("Name your price," Zell had said, looking the reporter in the eye.)

It's not unusual for Zell to proselytize. He did it two months later, on an airplane above Ohio. Zell turned to his seatmate, yanked up his shirt, and flashed his protruding ribs and his three-inch kidney scar. Zell told his seatmate that he'd do whatever it took to persuade her. "I think I freaked her out," he says.

Then, in October, Zell reconnected with an ex-girlfriend and he went through the same routine. "I told her that I would come to California where she lives," Zell says. "I said, 'I'll hold your hand ... I'll do anything you want.'" He assured her that the scar wouldn't be disfiguring. On the contrary, he said. The scar would be sexy. If he weren't married, in fact, and he had a kidney-donor lover, "I would kiss it so tenderly," he says. "The parts without the scar would be *less* beautiful."

Zell has been obsessed with kidneys ever since reading a *Wall Street Journal* article in 2002. Zell reads the *Journal* because he's a real-estate magnate, a multimillionaire, and he likes to keep his eye on the market. But this article wasn't about real estate. It was about the dire public-health crisis that is kidney disease. More than 3,500 Americans die each year for want of a kidney. More than 300,000 souls languish in dialysis—a blood-cleaning process that leaves you dog-tired and drained, six hours a day, three times a week. Zell decided he could spare part of himself to save a fellow human from this hell.

"The only cure for the disease of wealth," says Zell, "is to spend money." Zell won't reveal the size of his fortune, but it had to have been at least $45 million: He's given away that much money. Starting last year, he embarked on a charity spree, focusing on public-health causes. Last year, Zell and his wife, Emily, gave $6.2 million to the Centers for Disease Control, and they gave smaller amounts to other related causes until Zell had burned through $15 million.

It only whetted his appetite. He wanted to give it all away—including his kids' college-tuition savings. "Cooler heads prevailed," he says. But just barely. This spring, Zell gave $30 million in real estate—the bulk of his portfolio—to Ohio State University to start a school of public health. He doesn't have anything left for retirement.

Even then, something inside Zell demanded a more extreme sacrifice. When Zell told his wife about his kidney plan, she said she'd divorce him. Zell's parents, too, begged him to back away from the scalpel. "We told him the same thing we'll tell you," says his 90-year-old father, Irving. "He's a family man. He's got four little children. ..."

Friends, too, tried to talk him out of it.

Trapped between his ideal and his loved ones, Zell chose the ideal. On July 22, he sneaked out of the house and had his kidney removed at Philadelphia's Albert Einstein Medical Center. When he woke up the next day, he was out of his mind with pain. He couldn't take the hospital's narcotics, because they messed with his problematic stomach. But Zell was a trouper. When the TV cameras came, he struggled not to slur his words. He wanted people to see the procedure as routine.

Which is basically the truth. Giving a kidney isn't the huge production it used to be. Back in 1954, when the first kidney was successfully transplanted, doctors had to slice three-quarters of the way around you, and yank out a rib. These days, it's all done with tiny incisions and a fiber-optic camera. You can check into the hospital on a Thursday and be home watching *Monday Night Football* four days later. The risk of dying is about the same as from a hernia operation.

After the donation, Zell went on a media blitz, trying to get as many people to donate kidneys as possible. But there is a risk to the procedure. Only 151 people have given kidneys anonymously to nonfamily members. By proselytizing for kidneys, is it possible Zell is asking too much of us? And if he is, can he stop? The terrifying thing about Zell's do-gooding is that he doesn't know. "I want to go on giving," he says, "even if it leads me into poverty or disgrace or"—he stutters—"or an early death."

Many people besieged by the media after an act of selflessness end up changing their phone numbers or going unlisted. Not Zell. He *wants* to hear from people who need him. He spends a good part of each day now answering pitches—some brazen, some sincere, some just loony.

There was the guy who needed $40,000 to pay off a credit card (Zell said no), and the Nigerian limo driver from New York who wanted Zell to help him fight a lawsuit (Zell gave him two hours with his lawyer, worth $700). Zell has gotten pleas from family members, too. Which creates a dilemma. If he doesn't help Uncle Irv pay off a credit card but he gives cash to strangers, he looks callous. Yet he can save more lives by giving money to fight third-world diseases than he can by giving a friend $2 million to buy a house.

It's not that Zell isn't tender toward his family members. He just decided to discipline himself toward a higher goal. It's fairer, he believes, to love everybody instead of loving a select few. "I truly believe all of us are brothers and all of us are sisters," he says.

Zell's love ranges over the entire world. But does it have any depth? Donnell Reid, the recipient of his kidney,

is a 30-year-old African-American woman from Mount Airy, Pa., who used to take a bus to her dialysis treatments every other day. Zell calls her his "sister," but he knows her about as well as he knows the airline stewardess he met in September who gave him an extra packet of pretzels and "had a smile for everyone." Someone like that, he says, "is a true philanthropist, a greater philanthropist than I am." Zell loves the stewardess like he loves Donnell like he loves every person he meets. Abstractions all. It's simple to love an abstraction.

Zell's wife, Emily, wouldn't talk to me for this article, but I do meet her briefly one weekend morning at the family's modest suburban home, while I'm waiting for Zell. She emerges from the house and walks toward me. "Zell's watch stopped," she says pleasantly. "He's going to be another half an hour. He's meditating." She rolls her eyes a bit and smiles—a little shared joke between us.

Then I ask if I can interview her. "It's against my wishes that the story be published," she says, and turns on her heels. I tell her there's nothing I can do.

"Oh yeah there is," she says angrily. "You can get your hands off the keyboard." Then she walks into her house and slams the front door with righteous anger.

Zell has strained more than his marriage. He's also strained his relationship with his kids. His oldest son, a 12-year-old, used to let Zell tell reporters that he approved of Zell's financial giving. Now the kid has asked Zell to cut it out.

If you could rewind the tape of Zell's life far enough, you'd see him too at 12, protesting at Philadelphia's City Hall—something about housing integration in the Northeast. This was his first good deed, and it made his dad proud, according to what Irving told the newspaper.

It was Irving who taught young Zell the way the world works. An old-world Russian Jew, Irving never shed his faith in communism, or at least its basic ideals. A pressman by day, he played Paul Robeson records at night, and he told Zell how the world is run for the ruling classes, how blacks are oppressed, how ambition's a foolhardy trait—better to aim low and never attract attention. Irving just wanted his son to get steady work. When Zell got his first job—teaching disruptive public-school kids in North Philadelphia who didn't want to learn—Irving cracked a bottle of champagne. "He was euphoric," says Zell.

With wife Emily last winter: Zell's charity spree has taken a toll.

But Zell's sister Adria never approved of Zell's teaching job. She thought it was a waste of his talents. Zell listened. He has another sister, Hilary, who's now a psychiatrist in Missouri, but Adria was more of a kindred spirit. "She was bright and funny and pretty and everybody liked to be with her," says Zell. "She was generous toward people, and they took advantage of her. She had no worldliness."

Adria was a smoker, and in July of 1984, she was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. Before long, her organs failed, and she went blind. She died that December. "When she died, I, ah—" Zell pauses, shakes his head. "I went into a tailspin." He became severely depressed. "The only thing that pulled me out," says Zell, "was the thought that I would do good in her name."

Certainly he would have sacrificed his own life to save Adria's. But now Zell says he might give up his life to save anyone's provided the person could perform more good than Zell. If some miracle doctor somewhere needed a kidney, Zell has said he'd give his second kidney, too. When you save a life, he says, "You're saving the universe. That's what it says in the Talmud. To save a life, you're entitled to break any law." Of course, that's also the rationale of the guy who just drove a truck into Red Cross headquarters in Baghdad. "It's a wonderful thing," says Zell, "to die performing a moral act."

Zell's statements, even if they're only half-serious, put his loved ones in an impossible position. Yet he imagines that if Adria were still around, she'd be an ally in his quest for the moral life—unlike his parents, he implies.

The truth is that they're not as unsupportive as he imagines.

"He's a good guy, there's no question of that," says Zell's mother, Reeda.

"Now that it's over," says Irving, speaking of the kidney operation, "we're sort of proud of him, but at the time, we didn't agree with it."

When I tell Zell about his father's statement, his eyes bug out.

"He said that?" Zell says incredulously. He looks down and scratches his head. "You weren't leading him or anything? Like, 'Are you proud of your son?'"

"No."

Zell pauses and looks up, glazed over with innocent wonder. Softly, he says, "He hasn't told me that since I was 12 years old."

From "What if Zell Kravinsky Isn't Crazy?" by Jason Fagone. ©2003 *Philadelphia* magazine. Excerpted with permission.

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