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by **CHRISTALEE FROESE**
Photos courtesy of **LOUISE LERMINIAUX AND
CONNA JONES**

F A T E

How something great happened after one small town Saskatchewan girl accidentally followed another around the West.

WHEN Louise Lermينياux mapped out her life, the end of the road was already too close for comfort.

Not knowing the distance between now and then, she refused to occupy herself with illness, dialysis and death. What she did map for her future was life itself, a life that knew no bounds, waited for nothing and stopped for no one.

That life lifted her to the 2,400-metre peak of Macchu Picchu in Peru and the 5,900-metre summit of Mount

Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. It took her to Europe, the Amazon jungle and safaris in Africa. It brought her to the high seas where she sailed competitively against the healthy and the strong. It carried her through intense training for a dozen half-marathons and five full marathons.

But by her late 30s, this farm girl who'd grown up in Montmartre, Saskatchewan (pop. 500) could not outrun the reality of kidney failure. Having inherited polycystic kidney disease from her mother, she could only watch as

her kidney function dropped from 50 percent to 40 percent to 30 percent.

When it reached 20, her life as a successful IT director in California slowed to a walk, leaving her cold, tired and anemic. In early 2008, she told her boss that she needed to step down as director and just manage projects 40 hours a week instead of the 50 to 60 hours which was her norm. Little did they know, it took all her energy to continue to work.

"I would sleep for one to two hours after work, get up to eat and be back in

Conna (right) was still living on Vancouver Island when she visited Louise in southern California. Here, they're in La Jolla, just north of San Diego



Photo courtesy of Louise Lerminaux.

bed for nine to 10 hours just so I could work the next day and I was sleeping under a winter duvet even when it was plus 30 degrees Celsius. That was the start of acknowledging I was sick. I knew dialysis was near, but I dreaded the idea of it because I knew it would change my life significantly.”

It wasn't long before 20 percent became 10 percent and life as Louise knew it was slipping away. Either a kidney donor would be found, or dialysis would become a routine that consumed three to five hours a day, three days a week.

There would be no time for travelling the world, climbing mountains, or running road races.

IN 1989, CONNA PILKEY LEFT KUROKI, SASK. (POP. 65). She headed for Vancouver with dreams of travelling the world and becoming a rock star. However, her dream was cut short by reality. After what little money she had was stolen, Conna was forced to find work right where she was.

With dogged determination, the Grade 12 graduate of Wadena High

School walked into a northwest Calgary real estate office and insisted that they give her a job.

“I told them, ‘I’ll come back every day until you put me on your payroll.’”

Eventually, they hired Conna as a file clerk but her firecracker personality was noticed by the office’s realtors who groomed her for a career in sales.

By 1992, she was charged with sales for a major condominium developer. Her new position required a new office, which she was to share with the company’s sales coordinator.

“I hadn’t seen her for three or four months and I just couldn’t believe it. She was green and grey, the whites of her eyes were gone – even her tongue was a different colour.”

“When I walked into the office, I thought ‘wow, is she neat and tidy. Oh my gosh, she’s not going to like me.’”

BUT LOUISE LERMINIAUX LIKED CONNA PILKEY THE MINUTE SHE MET HER. “I remember she walked into the office, introduced herself and said we were going to be roomies. She had the biggest, brightest smile. I think I probably thought she talked a lot, but then I knew she was in sales.”

The Saskatchewan transplants worked as a team for two years, turning projects into financial successes. Their friendship at the office spilled over into afterhours. Even their boyfriends shared common interests, making the foursome a cozy social group that did almost everything together.

“It was just so easy for Louise and me to be friends. We were never demanding of each other, we were just there for whatever the other person might need.”

Eventually, life pulled them in different directions. Louise moved to

Vancouver in 1996 to become facilities coordinator for BC Gas Utility Ltd. In 1999, Conna, suffering from real estate burnout, sought refuge in the quiet Vancouver Island community of Nanoose Bay.

Without planning it, they had ended up just 18 miles apart across the Georgia Strait. They made the ferry trek often, leaning on each other through difficult relationship breakups. Then Louise moved again, this time to San Diego, California in 2002 to become the e-commerce project manager at a biotech firm.

AS FATE WOULD HAVE IT, CONNA MET A CHARMING CALIFORNIAN WHO WAS IN BC ON BUSINESS. In 2004, Conna Pilkey married Scott Jones from Orange County, became Conna Jones and moved to a community an hour and a half north of Louise’s house.

In California, Louise and Conna shared their lives again, with Louise becoming an extended part of the Jones

family, which included Conna’s three stepchildren Dani, Taylor and Jeremy. Conna was part of Louise’s life, too, cheering her on at races and travelling with her when she could.

In the fall of 2008, life changes forced a lengthy separation. Louise was busy earning an MBA, recovering from divorce and coping with deteriorating health issues. At the same time, Conna, after a difficult pregnancy, gave birth to her premature baby, Jake, who was hospitalized and needed a high level of care. Despite the complexity of their lives, the pair knew they needed to see each other.

Conna packed up Jake, and Louise gathered her strength. The long-time friends met in a restaurant halfway between their homes.

“I hadn’t seen her for three or four months and I just couldn’t believe it. She was green and grey, the whites of her eyes were gone – even her tongue was a different colour.” That’s the moment Conna knew.



2003, DECEMBER 27

Louise, second from the left, with climbing friends at the top of Mount Kilimanjaro (19,340 ft.) in Tanzania.



2004, AUGUST 31

Conna's wedding day



2007, JUNE 3

Louise after finishing a marathon on her 40th birthday with kidneys functioning at just 18%. Conna and her stepdaughter Taylor are on the left of the photo. Friend Kassie Graves is on the right.

Clockwise from top: Louise (left) and Conna hiking near Canmore, Alberta; Conna (1976) in grade one; Louise (1973) in grade one; The Jones family. Conna is in the centre, husband Scott is at top, daughter Taylor is right. The little guy is Jake, and Jeremy is beside his dad; Whale watching at Vancouver Island's Telegraph Cove.



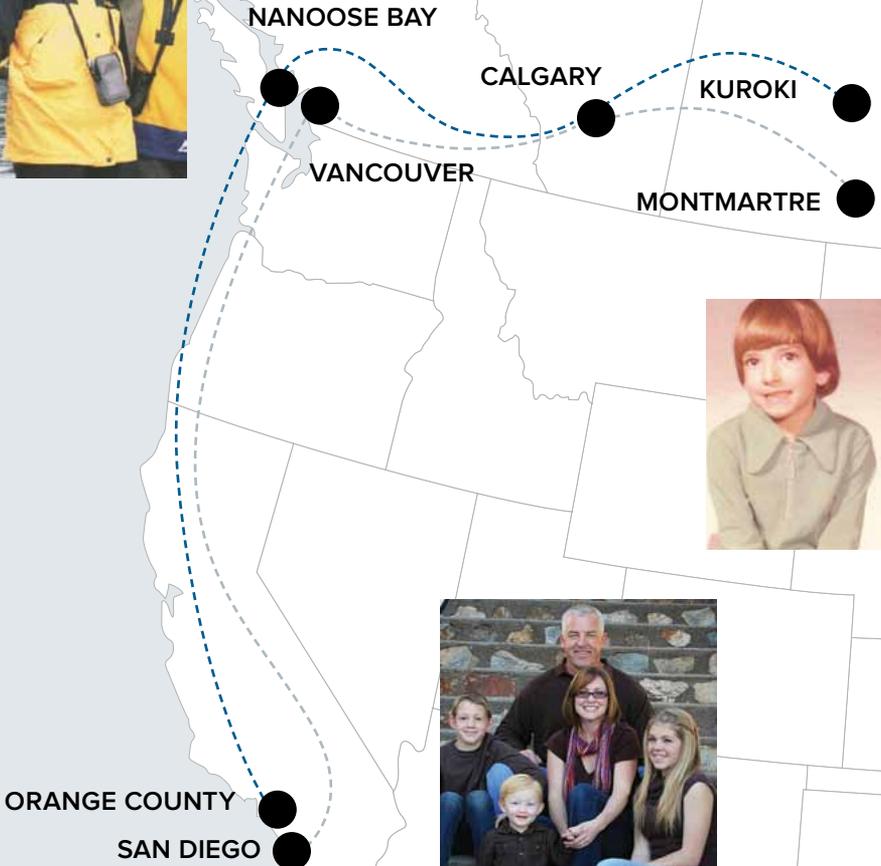
WITH HER KIDNEYS FAILING, LOUISE PUT THE WORD OUT to family and friends that she needed a healthy kidney in order to avoid dialysis.

Six friends from near and far agreed to undergo testing. Conna was the first to get through the multi-phased process. Over a month passed before the results were in. The long wait ended with a phone call. Conna was a match. So close, it was as if Louise and Conna were sisters.

"I felt like I had just won the lottery," said Conna, explaining that this gift to Louise would be payback for the gift of life that had been given to Jake earlier that year.

While Louise was relieved to have such a promising match, her enthusiasm was tempered with concern. "I told Conna it was too soon after her baby was born to consider being a donor for me."

Conna hadn't let life's obstacles get in her way before and she wasn't about to now. Despite the fact that a year is



2008, JANUARY 10
Jake, Conna's little warrior, is two days old



2008, NOVEMBER 7
Louise, left, has her new kidney and Conna is ready to leave the hospital.



2010, JULY 31
In the 5K race at the USA Transplant Games, Louise won bronze in the female recipients category and Conna finished sixth among female donors.

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the recommended wait time to donate a kidney after giving birth, she was insistent that she could handle the process just nine months after her son was born.

“I didn’t care to know the details. I was going to do it regardless of what it involved. I just needed them to tell me when and where to show up and where to lie down.”

THE TRANSPLANT PROCESS STARTED ON NOVEMBER 5, 2008.

Conna’s kidney was removed laparoscopically through her C-section scar and four small side incisions. Things went smoothly and within hours Conna was conscious and wanting to see the new owner of her kidney.

As for Louise, the news wasn’t as good. Conna’s healthy kidney was too large, so, after five hours of surgery, she needed another four hours to get the new kidney to fit in her small frame.

The next morning, Conna was finally able to see Louise.

“I walked in and we started to cry, which was the worst thing we could have done because our abdomens were all cut up and we were causing ourselves more pain. Then we started to laugh. I told her I had to get out of there before we hurt ourselves any further. But I saw that she had pink cheeks and white eyes and that’s all I cared about.”

TWO YEARS LATER, LOUISE IS BACK TO HER AMBITIOUS LIFESTYLE.

She competes in sprint triathlons, most recently in the USA Transplant Games, and runs in local races for organ donation and kidney disease awareness. She decorated the DonateLife float for the Rose Bowl Parade and she has set her sights on the 2013 World Transplant Games in South Africa.

Conna has now become a different version of the rock star she once dreamed of being. The stardom she found was at this summer’s opening of the USA Transplant Games in Madison, Wisconsin.

“The living donors marched into the coliseum to this huge round of applause, standing ovations and screaming, predominantly from recipients, and they just made us feel like rock stars. It was so overwhelming.”



2010, AUGUST 3

Closing ceremonies at the US Transplant Games in Madison, Wisconsin.

Louise and Conna are travelling together again, mostly down the road of creating world organ donation awareness. Their mission is to inform people about the ease, necessity, and even the beauty of organ donation. Back at the biotech firm, Louise is the company's poster child for organ donation, drug discovery, stem cell research and personalized medicine.

While they realize their story is a miracle, it's that very story that gives them hope that living donors can be found for every single person in need.

"If you know someone or you want to be a Good Samaritan," says Louise, "offer to donate to someone on the wait list. It's the most incredible living gift you can give. To a healthy person it is merely a couple months of healing, but to a recipient, it creates a new wide-open road."

For more information on organ donation, visit www.organdonations.ca or www.kidney.ca [West](#)

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