

FARMLIVING

A THING OF BEAUTY

A family near Vegreville, Alta., builds their farm around the principles of innovation, functionality and efficiency, but they didn't forget beauty. | Page 108



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RELATIONSHIPS | DONATIONS

The path of friendship

The greatest gift | Fate twists two lives together to help save one

BY CHRISTALEE FROESE
FREELANCE WRITER

Louise Lermينياux grew up on her family's Montmartre, Sask., farm knowing that she was going to make the most of her life.

Having inherited polycystic kidney disease from her mother, Lermينياux assumed that her time to live an active lifestyle would be short, so she packed it with adventure.

She climbed the 2,400 metre peak of Machu Picchu in Peru and the 5,800 metre summit of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania.

She travelled to Europe and the Amazon jungle and went on safaris in Africa. She sailed competitively with the healthy and the strong. And she ran mile upon mile to train for a dozen half-marathons and five full marathons.

But in her late 30s, this ambitious farm girl could not outrun the reality of kidney failure.

The accomplished information technology manager could only watch as her level of kidney function dropped from 50 percent to 40 percent to 30 percent. When it reached 20 percent in early 2008, life as a successful IT director in California slowed to a walk, leaving her cold, tired and anemic.

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

It wasn't long before 20 per cent became 10 percent. Either a kidney donor would have to be found or dialysis would become a routine that would consume three to five hours a day, three days a week.

In 1989, Conna Pilkey left Kuroki, Sask., for Vancouver with dreams of working on a cruise ship and becoming a rock star.



Conna Pilkey



Louise Lermينياux

However, her path was cut short when she was robbed at a friend's house during a stopover in Calgary, which forced her to find work there.

With dogged determination, the Grade 12 graduate from Wadena High School walked into a Calgary real estate office and insisted they give her a job.

"I told them, 'I'll come back every day until you put me on your payroll!'"

Eventually, Pilkey became a file clerk for the firm. Her firecracker personality got her noticed by the office's realtors, who brought her into the fold and groomed her for a career in sales.

By 1992, she was responsible for sales for a major condominium developer. Her new position required a new office, which she was to share with the company's sales co-ordinator.

"When I walked into the office, I thought, 'wow, is she neat and tidy. Oh my gosh, she's not going to like me,'" Pilkey said.

But Lermينياux did like her new office partner. The pair of Saskatchewan expats worked together as a team for two years, turning the projects they worked on into financial successes.



Jones (nee Pilkey) and Lermينياux at Pilkey's wedding in California

Their friendship at the office spilled over into after hours. Even their boy-friends shared common interests, making the foursome a cozy social group who did almost everything together.

"It was just so easy for Louise and I to be friends. We were never demanding of each other, we were

just there for whatever the other person might need."

Eventually, life and jobs lured them in different directions.

Lermينياux moved to Vancouver in 1996 to become facilities co-ordinator for B.C. Gas Utility Ltd., while Pilkey, suffering from real estate burnout, sought refuge in the quiet Vancouver Island community of Nanoose Bay in 1999.

Without planning it, Lermينياux and Pilkey had ended up 30 kilometres apart across the ocean.

They made the ferry trek often, leaning on each other through difficult relationship breakups.

Then Lermينياux moved again, this time to San Diego, California, to become the e-commerce project manager at a biotechnology firm.

As fate would have it, Pilkey met a charming American, Scott Jones, from Orange County, California, in 2002. Within a year, Conna Jones moved within one and a half hours from Lermينياux's house.

In California, Lermينياux and Jones were able to physically share their lives again, with Lermينياux becoming an extended part of the Jones family.

However, in the fall of 2008, life changes forced a lengthy separation. Lermينياux was busy earning an MBA, recovering from divorce and coping with her deteriorating health.

At the same time, Jones was going through a difficult pregnancy, giving birth to a premature baby. Despite the complexity of their lives, the pair knew they needed to see each other, no matter what it took.

Jones packed up her newborn baby, Lermينياux gathered her dwindling strength and the long-time friends met half-way between their homes at a California restaurant.

"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 Jones knew that she would do whatever it took to save her best friend's life.

With her kidneys failing badly, Lermينياux put the word out to family and friends that she required a healthy kidney to avoid dialysis. Six



Lermينياux (left) and Jones (right) on Nov. 7, 2008, two days after the kidney transplant.

friends from near and far agreed to undergo testing.

Jones was the first to get through the entire donor testing process.

She was a match, as close as if Jones and Lermينياux had been sisters. "I felt like I had just won the lottery," said Jones.

While Lermينياux 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."

Despite the fact that one year is the recommended wait time to donate a kidney after giving birth, Jones insisted 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 lay down."

The transplant process took place Nov. 5, 2008. Jones's kidney was removed laparoscopically through her caesarean section scar and four small side incisions. The process went smoothly and within hours she was conscious and wanting to see the new owner of her kidney.

The news wasn't as good for Lermينياux. Jones's healthy kidney was too large, so after five hours of surgery, a second four-hour surgery was undertaken.

The next morning, Jones was finally able to see her best friend.

"I walked in and we started to cry, which was the worse 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, Lermينياux is back to her ambitious lifestyle. She has become her company's poster child for organ donation and competed in the U.S.A. Transplant Games.

Jones 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 rockstars. It was so overwhelming."

The Saskatchewan friends can't explain how it is that their tissue types matched as close as if they were sisters, except to point to divine intervention.

"I will always be grateful to Conna for her kindness and generosity," Lermينياux.

"There really isn't a better description of a friend than one who is willing to truly share a part of her life with yours."



Lermينياux and Jones at the U.S.A. Transplant Games last summer.

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