

MARK KRAM JR.

## Life Goes On

FROM THE PHILADELPHIA DAILY NEWS

*First of two parts*

Chicago—Quietly, Sonia Rodriguez got out of bed and padded into the other room, where the evening before she had laid out her clothes for work. It was Wednesday, 6:30 A.M., and her husband Paco was still asleep, the gray light of a cold Chicago dawn beginning to seep through the windows of the small house that the couple and their baby daughter shared with his parents. Sonia slipped into the outfit that she had picked out, brushed her hair, and stopped back in the bedroom to look in on Ginette, who slept in the crib that was wedged against the wall. Sweeping up her purse, she glanced over at Paco and told herself she would phone him when he arrived later that day in Philadelphia. But as she stepped out the door he called to her.

"Oh?" he said, blinking the sleep from his eyes. "Are you leaving?"

She looked over her shoulder and said softly, "Yeah."

"Come here," Paco told her. Sonia walked over and sat on the edge of the bed. He reached up, drew her into his arms, and said, "I want to say goodbye."

Goodbyes were not easy for them. In the five years they had been together, they seldom had been apart. Even when they were still dating, he would stop by and see her at the end of the day, if only for an hour or so just to talk. But Sonia had not chosen to accompany her 25-year-old husband to Philadelphia, where that Friday evening Paco had a 12-round bout scheduled at the Blue Horizon with Teon Kennedy for the vacant United States Boxing Associa-

tion super bantamweight crown. Boxing had become a sport that Sonia looked upon with equal portions of acceptance and disdain. She accepted it because of the passion Paco had for it, and even now says that boxing was who he was. And yet part of her held it in disdain and she had stopped attending his bouts because of it, unable to cope with the queasiness that would send her fleeing from her ringside seat whenever Paco would engage an opponent in a toe-to-toe exchange. So when he asked her if she would like to come along to Philadelphia, he was not surprised when she smiled and told him, "No, you go. But hurry back to me." And he told her he would, adding as always, "I promise you."

An odd feeling had come over her in the weeks leading up to his departure that Wednesday. But she did not share it with Paco. Knowing how he was, she feared that it would only worry him—and he had been worried enough. In fact, he had been so overcome with anxiety that he was sure at one point that he was in the throes of cardiac arrest. At the emergency room, doctors told him he had had a panic attack, which Sonia ascribed to the pressure Paco had been under due to the approaching Kennedy bout. "Babe," he would remind her, "it's just three weeks away . . . it's just two weeks away . . . it's just a week away." But as excited as he appeared, he did not seem to be himself, and there was part of her that did not want to let go of him. While she told herself as he held her in his arms that morning that he would be back on Saturday, she would remember a conversation they had had a few days before, how engulfed it had been by this eerie edginess.

"What am I going to do without you?" he told her. "I am going to miss you so much."

"Be calm," she said. "Go over there and do what you have to do. And enjoy it."

"You are going to be very proud of me," he said. "This is going to really help us in the future. You and the baby and I are always going to be okay."

Every Sunday, they go to the Woodlawn Park Cemetery. As one-year-old Ginette plays amid the flowers that have been placed by the headstone, Sonia sits on the grass and ponders the tragic event that swept through their lives: one year ago this week, her beloved husband was lowered into the earth, the victim of head blows he received during his bout with Kennedy. For Sonia, 25, no words

can adequately express the ache that dwells in her heart, which only becomes heavier when she thinks of Ginette and the journey that stands before them. When her daughter asks her one day what her dad was like, Sonia will explain to her that he was a hero, not for what he had accomplished in the ring but because he was a courageous man who loved them both and who helped prolong the lives of his uncle—and four people who were strangers to him. Francisco “Paco” Rodriguez was an organ donor.

Great need exists for organs, and it increases year by year: there were 109,138 people on the waiting list at the end of October, and 6,504 in the local Gift of Life Donor Program area, which includes eastern Pennsylvania, southern New Jersey, and Delaware. At the very moment that Paco was pronounced dead at Hahnemann University Hospital—Sunday, November 22, at 7:42 P.M.—there were five people who were waging battles with grave health conditions as bravely as he himself had ever engaged an opponent in the ring. One of them was his uncle in Chicago, Ramon Tejada, who received a kidney in what is referred to as a “directed donation.” Four others were people who had never heard of Paco before his organs saved their lives: Alexis Sloan, of Norristown, received his heart; Ashley Owens, of Spring City in Chester County, received both his lungs; Meghan Kingsley, of Gaithersburg, Maryland, received his liver; and Vicky Davis, of Clifford Township in Susquehanna County, received his other kidney and his pancreas. While Sonia says that Paco had not legally designated himself as an organ donor, she signed the consent form because it had been a subject the two of them had discussed.

“Francisco was always very giving and I did not want his death to stop that,” says Sonia, seated at the dining room table with her in-laws. “We had talked it over and he had told me that it was something that he wanted to do. When they asked me if it was something we would like to do, I remember thinking: ‘What if it were Francisco that was hanging between life and death, if he had been the one who had needed someone to be so giving?’ I would have asked someone, ‘Please, just do it. You are giving someone a chance at life.’”

Inside the doorway of the house, a small shrine has been set up in memory of Paco: a photograph of him adorned with a halo and angel wings; shelves with vases of white flowers; and a statuette of the Blessed Mother draped with rosary beads. Someone lights the

candles at the base of it each day, the glow from which throws shadows across the bowed head of the porcelain Mary. Even a year later, the house remains a place of mourning, steeped in an unwillingness to let go. In a back room, the wall is covered with an inventory of the career that came to a sudden end that evening at the Blue Horizon. Wherever the eye turns there are boxing posters, gloves, and trunks, and up on hangers—carefully preserved beneath plastic—are colorful robes with “El Niño Azteca” scripted on the back. That was how he billed himself: “Kid Aztec.” Elsewhere, the bedroom he shared with Sonia and Ginette remains just the same as it was when she said goodbye to him. The bureau is cluttered with beauty products; the bed is strewn with a tangle of sheets; and the crib still sits against the wall near a crucifix.

Gone is the serene smile that beamed from Sonia in her wedding pictures. In place of it are downcast eyes. While she speaks with clarity and precision, her voice has a quality that seems on the verge of shattering, as if it were a piece of fine china toppled over by the tail of a prowling house cat. She does not cry and yet one can see that she has, that there have been days that have been long and unbearable. Moving out of the house and in with her sister has provided her with some support, but she says there is “no way to explain how injured I feel.” But she keeps herself busy and that has helped. There is Ginette and a job she has as a legal assistant and the accounting degree she is pursuing at DePaul University. And yet she has still not overcome the feeling that there is this hole in her heart, and she wonders to herself if it is ever going to heal. Sonia says, “You have to understand: he was the boy I had always dreamed of.”

Even as she continues to grieve, Sonia has found some solace in the fact that her husband still lives on—in Ginette but also in the rejuvenated lives of the organ recipients. In an unexpected way, she has come to feel a certain bond with them, as if they were part of her extended family. On days when the weight of her loss bears down upon her, it reassures her to know that there are people who had suffered for so long who now have the chance to live life to the fullest because of Paco. Gradually, it occurred to her that she would like to contact them, if only to let them know who her husband was. And that with them would always be a piece of the love she has for him.

There is an irony here. Because long before boxing killed Paco, it very well might have saved him. As a boy growing up in the Logan Square section of Chicago, an area settled by a dense Hispanic population, he was surrounded by the presence of gang activity. The community has calmed down since then, but when Paco was 12, shots came through the front window, shattered the television set, and embedded in the wall. Apparently, someone had fired from a speeding car at someone else who had been running away down the sidewalk. No one inside the Rodriguez home was injured. But it was the type of trouble that Evaristo Sr. had always feared, which is why he told his boys: "Listen, you get home from school, you do your homework, get your stuff together, and we'll go to the gym."

The old man had been a fighter himself, a journeyman welterweight who always seemed called upon by promoters on short notice to fill out a card. Poor, he began boxing in Guadalajara, Mexico, came to Chicago as an illegal in 1979, and won just one of his seven bouts in the United States. To support his wife, Maria, and their three children—which included Alejandro (Alex) and Evaristo Jr. (Tito)—he found work as a busboy and later in a tool factory. While his boxing career ended in 1983, he still did some sparring here and there and passed along his passion for the sport to his sons. It was a way for them to keep out of trouble, yes, but the ring always has been looked upon in Latino culture as a place of honor, where boys prove themselves as men and, if they are good enough, ascend out of poverty into something better. Tito won the National Golden Gloves championship at age 17 in 1997 and is still considered one of the finest amateur boxers ever to come out of Chicago. But he did not turn pro because of a conflict with Evaristo Sr., and in the years that followed, it would become Paco who would carry on the dreams that had been thwarted in the others.

Evaristo Sr. could see there was an urgency building in Paco. While Evaristo Sr. says he had been undisciplined as a boy, choosing to stay home and play instead of applying himself at the gym, Paco seemed animated by the success that Tito enjoyed. By the age of 17, Paco would win a National Golden Gloves championship, five local titles, and a berth in the 2004 United States Olympic Trials. Overall, he won 76 of his 82 amateur bouts. With that solid background, he turned pro in January 2005 and emerged as a

crowd favorite at the Aragon Ballroom and Cicero Stadium, the two Chicago-area boxing venues where he became a regular. Kid Aztec would bob up and down to the beat of a Mexican band as his entourage ushered him to the ring. Matchmaker Jerry Alfano says, "I tried to bring him up gradually by placing him with tougher and tougher opponents, so that we were building not just a record but a fighter." While Paco had suffered losses in two of his 16 fights, Alfano says that "everything was going pretty well."

Sonia stopped attending his bouts when friends began teasing her about how she would get up and run to the bathroom whenever the action heated up. But it just tore her up inside to see Paco in the ring, so she stayed away and waited for him to call from his dressing room with good news. They would then either go out to eat or swing by the emergency room, where Paco would have his face stitched up. When they would get home, she would hold ice on his bruises to ease the swelling. Two weeks before they exchanged vows at Our Lady of Grace Church, he was cut over both eyelids. Concerned how he would look on their wedding day—and in the pictures!—Sonia would have preferred that he not take the bout. "See, I told you," Sonia said when she saw his face. But Francisco told her the cuts would heal. And they did. No bride could have asked for a more handsome groom that August day in 2008. While they had been married in a civil ceremony two years before, Paco had promised her that one day she would have the church wedding she had always dreamed of. Paco had set aside some of the earnings from his bouts. They even had enough to go to Disney World for 10 days.

Inactivity became a problem for Francisco. Managed by Alex and trained by Evaristo Sr. and Tito, he turned down bouts in the Chicago area due to what Alfano says was a degree of overprotectiveness by his family; Tito says that the issue had more to do with the inability of Alfano to produce attractive enough purses. Whatever the case, Paco had had just one bout in the 15 months prior to his Philadelphia trip and had been working as a courier for a chiropractor. Sonia encouraged him to go back to school, which he would at Wright College, but only briefly. He had spoken to her of perhaps becoming a chef. When Ginette was born in August 2009, Evaristo Sr. even seemed to be of the belief that he should move on to something else. Paco told him, "Dad, you opened all these doors

for me and now you want to close them?" Evaristo Sr. told him he would never do that. But whatever obstacles stood before him seemed to fall away when Alfano told him of an opportunity that had come up in Philadelphia.

On paper, it seemed like a good fight: Paco and Kennedy both had had strong amateur pedigrees. In fact, Paco had beaten Kennedy as an amateur. "It was a crossroads bout for both of them," says Alfano, who served as the booking agent for Blue Horizon promoter J Russell Peltz. The winner would be assured a Top 10 world ranking by the International Boxing Federation. While the \$6,500 he would earn for the Kennedy bout was above par for a nontelevised bout, Paco could expect that his earning power would increase if he beat Kennedy, who had emerged as a promising pro on the Philadelphia scene. But even as Paco appeared to be on the upswing professionally, he seemed to be struggling with something profound.

Sonia could sense that he was unraveling. Two weeks before the Blue Horizon bout, she found him in their bedroom with his hands braced on the crib, gulping for air and unable to catch his breath. She drove him to the emergency room at Illinois Masonic Medical Center. On the way there, he had told her he was scared that he was going to die. The doctors diagnosed it as a panic attack, so she let it go at that. But a week later, he was once again in the grip of what Sonia says he called "this weird feeling." He and Sonia were taking Ginette to a well-baby checkup when Paco stopped in his tracks, turned to her, and said: "Babe, I just have this feeling that I am going to die before you." Sonia looked at him and said, "Why would you say that?" The odd moment passed, yet he asked her something that Sunday at church that surprised her, something that he had never asked her before.

He turned to her and said: "Do you think the priest will bless me?"

Sonia tossed in her sleep. It had been an anxious night, full of confusion. The bout had not gone well: Paco had been stopped by Kennedy in the 10th round. But when Sonia did not hear from him and he had not picked up his cell phone when she called, she began to grow worried. To keep her calm, her brother-in-law Alex, who had remained in Chicago, told her that Paco was at a hospital

having some cuts treated. The explanation gnawed at her: he still would have called. Sonia settled down Ginette and went to bed, only to be stirred awake at 3:00 A.M. that Saturday morning by the sound of the door bell ringing. Excitedly, she thought: Francisco! He took an early plane back! But when she looked through her doorway into the living room she saw Alex standing with her sister Celia. Both of them wore grave expressions.

Sonia got up.

Joining her was her mother-in-law, Maria.

"You know Paco is in the hospital," Alex began. "He has been badly injured. He hurt his head. We are not sure what is going on, but he is not doing very well."

All Sonia would remember is that she and Maria fell to the floor sobbing. In the fog that enveloped her, she thought back to the conversation she had with Paco the previous evening, before the bout. It was the last time they would speak. She was driving home from the job she then had at a bank. It was just small talk—how the baby was doing and so on—but they never got around to their prayer. They always said one before he stepped into the ring. But Paco knew she was behind the wheel and told her he would call her back if time permitted. When she did not hear from him, she looked at the clock—9:30 in Philadelphia, an hour earlier in Chicago—and began counting down the minutes. Quietly, she told herself as the evening progressed: Round 1 has to be over . . . Round 2 has to be over . . . To occupy herself, she played with Ginette and with her nephew. And she looked again at the clock.

For the 799 fans who showed up at the Blue Horizon that evening, it was a bout that proved to be just what Peltz had envisioned: "a terrific fight" not just on paper but in the ring. Paco was twice wobbled by Kennedy in the first round, but came back in the second throwing some big bombs of his own. The exchanges were fierce. Correctly, Peltz would say that by the end of Round 8, "the fight was up for grabs." But Kennedy won the ninth round decisively and the hard head and body shots he had connected with seemed to wear down Paco. Between the 9th and 10th rounds, the ring physician spoke with him and cleared him to continue. Twice in the 10th round Paco slipped to the canvas from exhaustion. When Francisco reeled into the ropes from a combination, referee Benjy Estevez waded in and stopped the bout at 1:52 of the round. And Paco labored back to his corner.



Scrambling up through the ropes to join him were Evaristo Sr., Tito, and cut man George Hernandez. Someone placed a stool under him and Paco sat down. As the ring physician, Jonathan Levyn, asked him some questions and peered into his eyes, Tito began cutting off the gloves. Evaristo Sr. looked on with apprehension. Paco had told him that his head hurt and that he was feeling sleepy. Evaristo said they would get him some aspirin later. When the ring physician stepped away, Tito asked someone to hand him an ice bag. Paco inhaled deep breaths as Tito sponged cold water on his back. Tito says that Paco became incoherent and he called for Levyn to come back. But Paco slipped into unconsciousness. EMS personnel strapped him to a stretcher and lowered him from the ring. As they passed through the crowd, Jason Barrett, a heavy-weight who had appeared on the card, looked over at Paco and told local matchmaker Zac Pomilio: "Man, that guy looks dead."

Crazy with worry, Sonia boarded a 6:00 A.M. flight to Philadelphia. With her were Maria, Alex, her sister Lorena Ramirez, and her brother-in-law Noe Ramirez. Tito picked them up at the airport and drove them to Hahnemann, where Sonia would be stunned by what she saw. Paco had a breathing tube attached to him, and bandages encased his head. A craniotomy had been performed on him to alleviate the swelling inside his skull, but he was in "extremely critical" condition. Sonia would say later that she still held out hope, even as the doctors who spoke to her on Saturday evening attempted to prepare her for the inevitable. On Sunday morning, he began to show signs that he was beginning to become herniated. As the brain continued to swell, it pressed up against the hard shell of the skull. With nowhere to go, it collapsed and shut off blood to itself, which produced brain death. Examinations by two physicians six hours apart would officially confirm that: the first occurred at 1:45 P.M., the second at 7:42 P.M. It was at the latter that Paco was pronounced dead.

Sonia held the hand of the boy she always dreamed of that Sunday and wondered how she could ever let go of it. Vaguely, she became aware of visitors who stopped by the hospital, which included Kennedy and his father, Ernest. Tentatively, Kennedy stepped forward and offered his condolences. At the Third Annual Briscoe Awards in October, where his bout with Paco was honored as the "2009 Philly Fight of the Year," he would say impassively: "It could have been me." Ernest, a former boxer himself, knew only too well

that it could have been. As he stood in the hospital and looked over at Sonia, he found himself reversing the characters in the tragedy before him. It was his son who was lying there. It was his family who stood at the bedside. He wondered: What would I do? What could I say? Gently, he told Sonia how sorry he was, but she was somewhere far away, thinking: Boxing is not even a sport. I hate it.

But there was still something to do that day, even if in her grief it seemed to Sonia to be so unreal. Given that Paco had been on a ventilator and had suffered a devastating neurological event, he was a candidate to become an organ donor. By 1998 law, hospitals in the United States are required to inform their area organ procurement organization of any person who is at or near death. According to president and CEO Howard Nathan, the Gift of Life Donor Program (GOL) receives 48,000 such calls each year. Of the 3,000 patients who are on a ventilator—which allows the organs to continue working until they can be recovered for transplant—only 439 last year ended up being donors. In the case of Paco, Hahne-mann placed a referral call to GOL at 1:42 A.M. Saturday and updated them at 9:00 A.M. Sunday when his neurological status deteriorated. GOL transplant coordinator Janet Andrews came to the hospital and followed events as they unfolded. When Paco was pronounced dead, she introduced herself to the Rodriguez family, arranged at their request for a priest to come by, and at 10:30 P.M. invited Sonia and Alex to sit down with her in a conference room.

Someone had handed Sonia a program from the Blue Horizon card with Paco pictured on the cover. When she sat down, Sonia had flipped it across the table in disgust. Having collected preliminary information that Paco was a viable potential donor, Andrews asked Sonia and Alex if they had considered the possibility of organ or tissue donation. Sonia told her yes, but asked to have Evaristo Sr., Maria, and Tito step into the room. When Tito appeared uncertain, Sonia told him that it was something that she and Paco had talked over at one point and he had told her it was something he wanted to do. Maria said she had a cousin who was on the waiting list for a kidney and asked if he could be accommodated. Told by Andrews that he could, the family agreed.

Sonia signed the consent form at 11:30 P.M. And with the stroke of a pen, five lives were forever changed.

It was hard to know where to begin. Sonia remembered when they had first met. Tito was dating her sister and Paco had told him, "There has to be a Rosales girl for me." But when they dropped by to pick up Sonia from the job she then held at Target, Paco sat in the backseat of the car and would not say a word; they had just gotten back from an evening out bowling. Sonia would remember how shy Paco was, and how embarrassed he was when Tito looked over his shoulder and teased him. But when her sister later asked her if she would like to go dancing with him, she said yes and they would never again be apart.

Somehow it had become vital to Sonia in the year that has passed that the organ recipients know who Paco was, and how precious he had been to her. Increasingly, she began to wonder how they were faring, if the organs they had received had helped them regain their health. In her inconsolable grief, Sonia found it was healing to her to imagine that they had, that the piece of Paco that lived on in them would allow them to find some happiness. Given that anonymity is guarded and some recipients can be uneasy with contact with the donor family, Sonia was instructed to send a letter through GOL and told that it would be forwarded to any of the recipients who would welcome hearing from her. Sonia hoped that one day they would even be able to meet.

So one day she sat down and began writing, in part: "Dear Recipient: My name is Sonia Rodriguez, the proud wife of Francisco Rodriguez . . . Francisco was a very loving husband, father and friend and most importantly, of a truly humble and kind heart, which to me, made him extremely special . . . We shared five years together, the best five years of my life, as he made me the happiest woman in the world . . . We want you to know that you are always in our thoughts and prayers and sincerely hope that you are doing well. Hope to hear from you soon."

She then slipped a picture inside the envelope of Paco. And added: "By the way, he was very handsome."

*Second of two parts: Blessed by Paco*

Death was near. They told her that. Chances were it could be weeks—perhaps longer but not significantly unless she had a lung transplant. For years, Ashley Owens had known that she would not live

to be 30 or even 25, that cystic fibrosis would sweep her away one day before she would have a chance to have a career or a wedding or children. It was a given she had come to accept. But now that she was coughing up blood and was in what her doctors called "the end stages," the sudden finality of her circumstances terrified her. All of it seemed to be happening too soon.

They told her that they would be moving her to the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. It was not something she wanted to do, if only because she had become accustomed to St. Christopher's Hospital for Children. She had been going there three or four times a year since she had been an eight-year-old and had befriended the nursing staff. But her doctors told her that there was a surgery that she would have to have, and that it was perhaps a good idea to become acquainted with the transplant team at Penn. Oddly, a feeling of calm settled over her at that point—what she would later describe as "a trance-like state." So she found a pen and some paper and began writing goodbye letters: to her parents, Bob and Charlotte; her young brother, Robert; and her boyfriend, Jesse, the young man who stood by her through her worst days.

With a shaggy beard and gentle bearing, Jesse Quinter swept her off her feet, both figuratively and literally. When she had been too weak to walk somewhere, Jesse lifted her then five-foot, 69-pound body up and carried her on his back. They had met each other in study hall at Owen J. Roberts High School in Pottstown. Ashley told him before their first date how sick she was, but he just shrugged and told her: "I like you for you." However worrisome her ordeal would become, Ashley would come to depend on Jesse to cheer her up. When she tearfully told him on the phone that day that she would be leaving for Penn, he left early from his job at the Warwick Child Care Center in Lionville and hurried to her side.

They talked. But she was upset and no words could seem to soothe her. Even when Jesse reassured her that she would be fine, she was in a forlorn place that seemed beyond even his reach. It was then that an idea popped into his head. He excused himself and said he had to get something from his car. When he came back, he sat down in a chair by her bed and resumed their conversation, which he always tried to keep light. Instead of dwelling on the sobering prognosis that faced her, Jesse would ask what she wanted to do when she got out of the hospital, where she would go

to dinner and what trips she would like to take. It went on like that until he paused.

"I have to talk to you about something," he said.

Casually, Ashley replied: "About what?"

Jesse got down on one knee and displayed a diamond ring.

And with eyes wide, Ashley cried, "Oh, my God!"

On the very evening this scene was unfolding last year—Friday, November 20—Francisco "Paco" Rodriguez was preparing to step into a boxing ring at the Blue Horizon, where he had a scheduled 12-round bout with Teon Kennedy for the vacant United States Boxing Association super bantamweight title. Paco was stopped by Kennedy in the 10th round, passed out in his corner, and died of a head injury two days later at Hahnemann University Hospital. But it was there that one story ended and another began, the tale of how with a stroke of a pen on a consent form, a grieving widow bestowed life upon five people by offering seven organs from the body of her beloved husband for transplant donation. What began in a place of unutterable grief ended up in a realm of hope reborn.

Eighteen people die each day in the United States waiting for a transplant. In the case of the five people who received organs from Paco, each of their histories is tied together by a common thread: they had endured untold suffering in the grip of their various illnesses. Only days away from death in some cases, they looked upon themselves as fighters in the same very real sense that Paco had been. With the exception of his uncle, Ramon Tejeda, who received a kidney in a "directed donation," none of them had ever heard of the young boxer from Chicago. Given what they have received from him—a heart, a liver, two lungs, two kidneys, and a pancreas—none of them will ever forget him. While the recipients have not yet met, they share a bond that now unites them with someone they have come to cherish: Paco.

The five are:

• *Ashley Owens, 23, of Spring City, Chester County: Both Lungs*

As a 10-month-old baby, she weighed less than seven pounds. Initially, doctors suspected she had a tumor. But tests revealed that she had cystic fibrosis, which compromised her breathing and to some extent her digestion. Simple childhood pleasures such as

running and swimming were beyond her ability. In and out of the hospital during her school years, she became an excellent student with the help of a tutor. Physically, she began "going downhill" at age 20 or so, a period during which her lung capacity dropped to as low as 20 percent. Without the help of oxygen her lips would turn blue. Concerned by the statistics that foretold an uncertain outcome for lung-transplant recipients, she held off going onto the waiting list until just hours before she suffered a collapsed lung on November 13, 2009. Of the pain her daughter endured, Charlotte Owens says, "Some days she would push through it. Other days it would be more than she could bear."

Ashley says: "Until the last two or three years, I had an okay handle on it. But when I was 20, I had stopped responding to the medication I was taking. My body had become so full of it that I had become immune. They told me I had two years to live. When I was 21, they told me I had one year to live. I was scared."

• *Meghan Kingsley, 26, of Gaithersburg, Maryland: Liver*

At 16, she was diagnosed with neurofibromatosis type 2, characterized by the growth of noncancerous tumors along the nerve that transmits information from the inner ear to the brain. An exceptional competitive swimmer who had dreamed one day of going to the Olympic Games, she underwent surgery in June 2001 for the removal of a tumor and was left deaf in one ear. In October 2007, she had decompression surgery on another tumor that doctors chose not to remove. In an effort to preserve what remained of her hearing, they instead carved away some bone that would allow the tumor room to grow. However, she began experiencing significant hearing loss and in September 2009 enrolled in a study for the experimental drug PCT299. By November, she was in the throes of liver failure.

Meghan says: "I became very, very ill and ended up in Johns Hopkins. I remember I was constantly burping; I had so much fluid in my stomach. I became jaundiced. [The whites of] my eyes were green and yellow. Mom said I looked like 'The Grinch.' I no longer had any bodily function. They later told me I was within 48 hours of dying."

• *Alexis Sloan, 27, of Norristown: Heart*

At 22, she was diagnosed with congestive heart failure, prior to which she had experienced symptoms that included a dry cough,

fatigue, and shortness of breath. "A lot of big words were thrown at me," she says. "Scary." Within a year of her diagnosis, she received a biventricular pacemaker and defibrillator implant. Efforts to manage her condition with medication failed and in March 2007 she says she "coded," which is hospital slang for going into cardiopulmonary arrest. Doctors then equipped her with a left ventricular assist device (LVAD), which she found to be an unwieldy contraption. Battery-operated, it had internal and external components that left her feeling on some days as if she was a robot. To get on the waiting list for a heart, she had to fulfill a standard set of requirements that proved that she would submit to postoperative care. In May 2008, she had done that and was given a pager, with which she would be contacted when a heart was available.

Alexis says: "When they gave me the initial diagnosis, it was devastating. It seemed like a death sentence. There was a lot of confusion. When I got the LVAD, I was not happy with it. No young person should have to live that way. With the protocols I had to go through, it seemed like it was taking forever to get on the list. I became depressed and at one point even suicidal. I just thought: 'I am going to die anyway . . .'"

• *Vicky Davis, 58, of Clifford Township, Susquehanna County: Pancreas, Kidney*

At 37, she was diagnosed with diabetes, which through the years became progressively worse. In December 2005, she was told that her kidneys were failing. She went on dialysis in April 2006 and within a year was placed on the waiting list for a new kidney and pancreas. Initially, she says, she was told the wait would be just a few months. But whenever she received a call that there was a potential donor for her—and she says she received nine of them—the kidney and pancreas would end up going to someone else or there would be some other issue that would come up. For three and a half years, she spent three days a week on dialysis, a process by which the blood is cleansed of toxins.

Vicky says: "Going to dialysis was like having a job. I would have to be there by 5:30 A.M. and I would not get back until 10:00 A.M. And it was so draining. People would ask me, 'Do you work?' And I would say, 'No, I am on dialysis.' It takes a lot out of you."

• *Ramon Tejada, 58, of Chicago: Kidney*

At 40, Tejada had his left kidney removed because of kidney

stones. In December 2003, his right kidney began to fail. It was full of cysts and functioning at only 10 percent. He began dialysis and was placed on the waiting list for a kidney. Increasingly, the three-day-a-week, four-hour-a-day dialysis treatments began to wear on him. Depression set in. Though he says they were keeping him alive, they were not eradicating the underlying problem he had. Unable to continue in his factory job, he went on disability. On dialysis for six years, he had inched to the top of the waiting list when he received word last November that Paco had died and that his kidney was being offered to him in a "directed donation." Paco was the son of his cousin, Maria.

Ramon says: "I was not doing too well. I had been on dialysis for so long. When I heard what happened to Paco, I was so very sad, very depressed. I remember him as a boy. Knowing that the kidney would come from him was hard, but it was something I knew that Paco would have wanted me to accept."

Ramon pauses and says, "He was giving me a gift."

Jesse had told Ashley that evening when he proposed: "We have been through a lot of stuff, and we will have more stuff to go through. This is not the end. But whatever happens between now and whenever, I just want you to know that I will be here for you. Whatever happens, you can count on me."

And with that he slipped the ring on her finger, which had become so bony from her weight loss that it had to be reinforced with tape to keep it from slipping off. Ashley gazed at it as her eyes pooled with tears.

Immediately, the hopelessness that had engulfed her seemed to lift. From the hallway, the nurses came into the room to admire it, one after another. Suddenly, she says she found "the courage" to go over to HUP, where she was transported later that evening. There, she and Jesse had an impromptu engagement party. He ordered in pizza and wings. What they were unaware of as they sat there eating was that Paco was slugging it out with Kennedy at the Blue Horizon, the outcome of which he had hoped would propel his boxing career into a place where he could command larger purses and better support his wife, Sonia, and their baby daughter, Ginette. Uncertain of when she would get the transplant she so desperately needed, Ashley said good night to Jesse and went to sleep.



Whatever else the process of organ recovery and the ensuing transplant surgeries is, it is a synchronization of many moving parts. In the case of Paco, it began when he was declared brain dead on Sunday, November 22, at 7:42 P.M., at which point Janet Andrews, the transplant coordinator for the Gift of Life Donor Program, introduced herself to the Rodriguez family, offered her condolences, and arranged for a priest to come by at their request. At 10:30, Andrews sat down with them and offered them the option of organ and/or tissue donation. Sonia signed the consent form an hour later. Only when that occurred could Andrews move forward. She alerted the Illinois Organ Procurement Organization of the availability of a kidney for Ramon and arranged for Paco to undergo a series of tests to evaluate his suitability to be a donor, including an echocardiogram to test his heart. Until his organs were recovered, he would remain on a ventilator with his heart beating.

On Monday at 9:00 A.M., GOL began the organ allocation procedure: multiple potential recipients are identified and the organs are offered to the transplant surgeons, who assess them and reply via mobile device if they are interested or not. If they are, GOL contacts them by telephone and advises them of where they are on the list. By 1:00 P.M., the allocation procedure had been completed, the operating room space had been reserved, and the recipients had been contacted. Upbeat, Ashley says she prepared as if she was going to get better by taking a shower and braiding her hair. Told by her surgeons that they had found "a great liver," Meghan sat up in her hospital bed and said, "Let's go for it." Alexis was contacted not by her pager but by cell phone and told, "Come and get it. It's yours." At her dialysis appointment, Vicky was informed in a call and replied: "Are you sure?" Ramon could not help but think of Paco and how hard it had to be for Maria to lose a son.

That Monday at 6:30 P.M., four recovery teams entered the operating room at Hahnemann, where Paco was prepped and draped. Each organ has to be implanted within a certain span of time once it has been recovered. Says Howard Nathan, the president and CEO of GOL: "You have 3 hours for the heart, 6 for the lungs, 6 to 12 for the liver, 12 for the pancreas, and up to 48 for the kidney." In the course of the three-and-a-half-hour surgery, the heart and other organs were cooled by separate cold perfusion lines and were removed one by one. At 9:07, the heart was recovered, triple

bagged, and transported to the adjoining operating room for Alexis. At 9:15, both lungs were recovered and rushed to HUP for Ashley. At 9:50 P.M., the liver was recovered and flown by helicopter to Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore for Meghan. And at 10:00 P.M., both kidneys and the pancreas were recovered. A kidney and the pancreas were hurried to Geisinger Medical Center in Danville, Pennsylvania, for Vicky, and the other kidney was flown the following morning to the Rush University Medical Center in Chicago for Ramon.

Given that Paco had been a highly trained athlete, his organs were exceptional. In fact, Charlotte Owens said that the surgeon told her that he had never worked with better lungs, which Ashley discovered worked wonderfully. Suddenly, she discovered that she could breathe deeply, and that she had stopped coughing. Within weeks of their operation, the other recipients reported excellent progress. Alexis says she could hear "the profusion of blood" running through her, "that ocean sound," and that each of her senses became amplified. "I could think better," she says. "I was even answering questions off of *Jeopardy!*" While Meghan has been hospitalized seven times since her transplant for periods ranging from four to 23 days and still has "dozens of tumors" in her body from her neurofibromatosis, she says she is "no longer dying but living." And Vicky and Ramon both say they have regained strength.

But curiosity set in. With the exception of Ramon, none of the others knew who the donor was. Confidentiality guidelines are such that the identities of the donor and the recipients are guarded and cannot be set aside unless either party agrees to share information. Consequently, there was always only speculation on the part of the recipients on the identity of the donor. While she was in her initial recovery, Meghan says that some friends tried to piece it together: the liver had come from Philadelphia from a 25-year-old male. When the friend told Meghan that a boxer of that age had just died in Philadelphia, she remembers thinking: "How bizarre! In this moment, I could not be fighting more."

Meghan says, "I just knew it was him. I could feel his presence."

Outside, a November rain was slanting from the gray sky in heavy sheets. But inside the third-grade classroom at Limerick Elementary School, it was dry and warm and filled with the enthusiasm of children, who were seated on the floor at the front of the room

with their student-teacher, Ms. Owens. In preparation for a book the class would be beginning soon, *The One in the Middle Is the Green Kangaroo* by Judy Blume, Ashley asked them to predict what certain items she placed before them would have to do with the story: a jar of peanut butter; a doll with a broken leg; a kangaroo; and a green marker. Working individually and then in groups, Ashley recorded some of the suggestions on an easel.

She stepped back to look at them and said, "These are all good predictions, but guess what? None of them are right."

The children moaned: "Awwwww!"

"So," she continued, "we are going to have to find out what happened compared to the predictions. Okay? It should be a lot of fun."

Scarcely taller than some of her students, Ashley had always hoped to become a teacher, specifically third to sixth grade. She enjoys the enthusiasm that the children bring with them to class each day. When she graduates this month from West Chester University, she plans to start looking for a teaching job in Pennsylvania or New Jersey, somewhere she and Jesse can settle down. Doctors have advised her not to teach children any younger than third grade because it would place her at an elevated risk for infections. Such warnings are heeded by her but not just because of her own health. She says she has a responsibility not just to herself but to "the gift" that she has received. To show her appreciation to Sonia, she has crocheted a pink blanket for Ginette.

It is something the others also say, that they feel a connection to Paco and his family. With the aid of Lara Moretti, the family services supervisor for GOL, Sonia reached out to the recipients in a letter to let them know who her husband was, how deeply she loved him, and how she hoped that they were doing well. Says Moretti, who vets each correspondence: "Typically, families look upon the donation as a small bit of good that can come out of something terrible." One by one, the recipients replied—again, through Moretti. They told of their ordeals and of how grateful they were, how the organ they received allowed them to become fully alive and be with their loved ones. In a way that she had not anticipated, Sonia found the letters she received to be helpful to her as she had moved through the stages of grief. Sonia says she hopes that she can remain in contact with them.

"The 25 years that Francisco lived were awesome," says Sonia, as

a photograph of her husband looks down at her from the dining room of his boyhood home in Chicago. "He was healthy and enjoyed life to the fullest—and now [the recipients], who have suffered for so long, have that opportunity. I want to be sure they are okay and taking care of themselves, not just because they are carrying a piece of Francisco with them but because life is supposed to be lived. I pray for them every day."

Along with what Sonia has told them, the recipients have found out more information about Paco online, where there are portions of a few of his bouts. Alexis says that she became "obsessed" with learning more about him. Given that she is a big boxing fan, she says she is surprised she had not been at the Blue Horizon for his bout with Kennedy. It was an event she would have attended, and can only think that she stayed at home that evening because of her health. But she has looked into who Paco was and says "he was no slouch," not just a fine amateur and pro boxer but a good family man, "known for joking around and laughing." Says Alexis: "I was happy to learn that he had that kind of spirit."

The bond to Paco that they feel is a deep one. In the hard days that followed her surgery, during which she experienced periods of dementia, and in her subsequent hospital stays over the course of the last year, Meghan would find herself saying, "Come on, Paco! We can do it. Work with me on this." Once, she looked down at her hands, which for a period were covered with gloves. She said to herself: "Look! I am a fighter, just like Paco!" When she had a setback in March, she rubbed the scar at the site of her incision and promised Paco: "You know, if you get me out of this, we'll go see your wife and your little girl." Meghan says she hopes to do that at some point, if only just to thank Sonia and the Rodriguez family in person.

"I feel I am not just doing it for myself now, but I am doing it for him and his family," says Meghan, who is a graduate of Elon University in North Carolina. "I want to know how Sonia is doing. I want to know how Ginette is doing. I want to go there and visit, and see the gym where Paco boxed. Me, being an athlete, I understand the dreams he had. I had wanted to be a champion. So I want to be a part of that. I would like to think of them as my extended family."

Vicky has a photo of Paco taped to her refrigerator. "When Sonia wrote me, I read her letter three times," she says. "He was so young.

And she is young. But you could see there was this strong bond between them. I hope that we can become close. I would like that. Like the daughter I never had."

Vicky pauses and adds, "Somehow just saying thank you is not enough."

There will be a wedding. Bob Owens did not think he would ever have the chance to do it, but he will walk Ashley down the aisle and give her to Jesse. While there are still plans to be arranged, Ashley says she would like to have her wedding outdoors at the Valley Forge National Park and then honeymoon in Greece. Jesse says he would prefer to go to the United Kingdom, but says that Greece is fine, that he keeps telling her: "You set it up. Go where you want to go and I will follow. I want you to enjoy yourself."

Given that it is very likely she would have died were it not for the transplant, Ashley looks upon each day as precious, even if there are some worries as she moves forward. While her doctors have told her there is no physical reason she cannot have children, she is aware that the life expectancy statistics for lung-transplant patients are somewhat less encouraging than they are for the other organ recipients. "They say only 50 percent survive five years and 20 percent survive 10 years," says Ashley, who adds that she has also been told the absences of setbacks in the initial year are a positive indicator. But what also has her concerned is how she is going to continue to pay for the care she has to have, which includes 25 prescription drugs each day. While she and the other recipients have been covered by health plans, it has offset only a portion of the costs that they have incurred.

But Ashley does not dwell on any of this. Instead, she thinks of Paco and Sonia and Ginette; she thinks of her parents, Bob and Charlotte, and her brother, Robert; and she thinks of Jesse, who held her hand before she was wheeled into surgery and held it again when she came out. She thinks of what she can now do that she could never do before: get on a bike and go wherever she pleases; dive in a pool and hold her breath underwater; and slip on a pair of running shoes and just take off. It was something she did last March when she and her family were at Longwood Gardens. Seeing a big field stretched out before her, she challenged her brother to a race and shouted, "Daddy, take a picture!" And off she ran, the sun on her back, the wind rushing over her face.