

## **ZELL KRAVINSKY DOESN'T GET IT.**

*He has tried, he says, to live a moral life.*

*How could he be the bad guy?*

By JERRY SCHWARTZ

Starting from nothing, he made millions -- and then gave millions away to save human lives. Then, this summer, he relinquished something more precious. He donated one of his kidneys to a stranger, a poor woman who had struggled through life.

And yet, he has suffered insults and attacks -- by Internet posters, like the man who called him "a nutjob." By newspaper columnists, such as the one who questioned his motives.

"Generous man or heartless lunatic?" the headline read.

Kravinsky is befuddled. "I'm not generous, and I'm not insane," he says. "Maybe the sanest thing I do is to give things away."

Perhaps the hostility has something to do with the way Kravinsky sneaked out of the house and to the hospital on that July morning, so that his wife, Emily -- worried that he was risking his life, fearing that one of their four children might someday need that kidney -- could not stop him. It imperiled his marriage.

Perhaps it has something to do with some of the things Kravinsky said in the spotlight's glare. No one should have two houses when people were homeless, he said, and no one should have two kidneys while others struggled to live without one. And he suggested he might give his other kidney to someone who would better serve humanity.

Which would, of course, be the end of Zell Kravinsky. "I should just give all of me to those who need me, whether it is my body, my money or myself," he says.

The things Kravinsky does, the things he says, make some people uncomfortable. He is somewhere out there, at the far outreaches of altruism, and we're not there with him, and logic leads to one of two conclusions. Either he's crazy, or we're selfish.

"Maybe it's a kind of rationalization, but at some point we get comfortable with what we're doing for other people, and we say, 'that's enough,'" says Barry Katz, a friend of Kravinsky's.

Kravinsky has never reached that point. Katz says his very existence forces the question:

"If you could do more, and you're not doing it, why not?"

Donnell Reid cannot understand the criticism -- but then, Zell Kravinsky's kidney is at work inside her, allowing her a normal life after eight years of dialysis. To her mind, her benefactor is a hero, while his detractors "aren't willing to put their neck out for someone they don't know."

But she, like nearly everyone else, doesn't understand what drives Zell Kravinsky.

"Zell's a very complex man," says James Kahn, a friend since 1969, when they were sophomores at Philadelphia's Central High School. "You talk to him for just a little while, you realize that he has all kinds of interesting facets, some of them seemingly contradictory."

## *Started early in life*

When Kravinsky was 12, he picketed Philadelphia's City Hall, demanding that low-income housing be built in the city's white Northeast, where his family lived. "It didn't endear me to my neighbors," he says

Coincidentally, that same year Kravinsky bought his first shares in the stock market.

His mother was a teacher, his father a printer with radical leanings. Their son skipped a year of high school and a year at Dartmouth, where he got a degree in south Asian studies. At the University of Pennsylvania, he got doctorates in rhetoric and Renaissance literature. He would teach at Penn, but only after spending seven years in the slums of North Philadelphia, educating emotionally disturbed kids.

But by then, he was taking a capitalist path, as well. He bought a small apartment building in the Northeast, and rented it to African Americans, although he says neighbors broke its windows and defaced it with graffiti. Still, he made "a small profit," and began buying, fixing and selling properties around the Penn campus in West Philadelphia.

Eventually, he would buy and sell other, larger properties, and invest in sophisticated real estate instruments. He bought and sold shopping malls, large parking lots, distribution centers.

The millions piled up, but the Kravinskys do not act like millionaires. They live in an older twin home; Kravinsky drove a battered '86 Toyota, giving it up for a minivan only when friends expressed fears for his children's safety.

"We were constantly encouraging him to spend a little more of his money and make his life and his family's life a little more comfortable," Katz says.

He wouldn't listen. From the very beginning, he says, he had a grand plan: He would make millions, and then give them away.

He was steeled in his resolve by the death of a sister, Adria, to cancer in 1984. "She was a rare soul, exceptionally good natured, not a mean bone in her body," he says.

So in the past two years, Kravinsky and his wife:

- + Made a large donation to the Wordsworth Academy, a school for special-needs children.

- + Created a \$6.2 million Adria Kravinsky Endowment for Public Health at the CDC Foundation, to support the work of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Kravinsky didn't have a suit to wear at the announcement. He purchased one for \$20 at a thrift shop.

- + Donated a million square feet of Ohio commercial real estate worth \$30 million to the Ohio State University school of public health.

He would retain some money for his family's needs -- funds were set aside for the education of his children, who are all younger than 13. But otherwise, the aim was to give away his fortune.

## *Genesis of an idea*

Some time ago, Kravinsky read an article in the Wall Street Journal about kidney donations. According to The National Kidney Foundation, 59,255 Americans are on the

waiting list for a kidney donation; 3,641 died last year, waiting. African Americans are especially in need -- they represent about a third of those on the waiting list.

Kravinsky took the clipping and put it in a drawer next to his computer. A plan was hatched: He would donate a kidney when his round of philanthropy had ended. "I thought of it as a treat to myself," he says. "To give a kidney would be vastly satisfying."

He wanted to donate his kidney to a low-income African American person, so he chose Albert Einstein Medical Center, which serves heavily black North Philadelphia. But he says the hospital tried to dissuade him -- because Einstein feared lawsuits if something went wrong, he theorizes.

Not so, says Dr. Radi Zaki, who performed the surgery. The reason Kravinsky was grilled by the doctors and sent to a psychiatrist was to ensure that he really wanted to do this. Yes, he was sure.

Zaki had performed 200 kidney transplants, but he had never taken a kidney from a living donor and placed it in the body of an unrelated recipient.

"To me, when I first saw him, I thought this person must be a Communist," Zaki recalls.

In early July, hospital officials introduced him to Donnell Reid. They talked for two hours, and she told him the story of a hard life -- orphaned by age 8, she had suffered through an abusive relationship, then worked as a counselor for a hot line for abused women. She learned she suffered from hypertension only when her kidneys shut down. Eight years of dialysis had taken its toll.

They talked about how they both liked to read, and how they both liked poetry. At no point did he give any indication that he was wealthy. She thanked him, but he said he deserved no thanks, because he should be doing far more. On July 22, Kravinsky left his house in the early morning, long before his family awakened, and went to the hospital. The surgery lasted three hours.

Kravinsky's wife, Emily, learned about it that day at the supermarket, when a newspaper headline caught her eye. By then, her husband's right kidney was attached to another woman.

To Kate Fratti, columnist for the Bucks County Courier Times, Kravinsky is "a selfish ---."

"From my vantage point," she wrote, "Zell Kravinsky is no better than any person who'd consider turning his back on his or her young family to fill a personal need -- another partner, an addiction, the need to 'find himself' in mid-life, or in Zell's case, self-glorification."

Kravinsky sighs. A slight man, of 49 with hair that is fading from red to gray, he speaks quietly but intensely as he ticks off his defenses.

First, the danger was slight -- one in 4,000 donors suffers complications. Second, the chances that his children might need a kidney some day -- and that a sibling wouldn't have a better kidney to contribute -- are minuscule.

Besides, he asks, how could he refuse to help a woman suffering from a very real, very serious illness because his children might someday be sick? And why are his children's lives more important than other people's lives?

"They say charity begins in the home. I don't know why it ends at home," he says.

He has gone public with his donation because he hopes it will inspire others to donate organs, he says. Any glory, he says, was outweighed by the criticism he has faced, and by the anger of his wife, who threatened to leave him.

Emily Kravinsky, a psychiatrist, did not return a call seeking comment. "We're working things out," her husband says.

Singer Pat Boone is trying to help. Boone, who champions a U.S. Blood Donor Registry through the Web site - <http://usblooddonors.org/> - contacted Kravinsky after he heard about his donation. He wrote to Emily Kravinsky, urging she reconcile with her husband.

Zell Kravinsky, he says, "is an American hero."

The Pennsylvania House of Representatives agrees. It passed a resolution describing Kravinsky as "a shining example of humanity and beacon of compassion."

Letters arrive daily, praising him. Among them, of course, are pleas for help from people who have maxed out on their credit cards, or fallen behind on mortgage payments. He's written a few checks, he acknowledges.

He could never give enough, never be good enough. Sometimes, he thinks there is a thin membrane separating him from a perfectly moral life, and if he just pushed a little harder, he could press through it and love everyone and be totally self-sacrificing.

Still, he probably will not try to donate his other kidney, in deference to his wife and children.

Instead, he's looking into other donations: his bone marrow, a lobe of a lung, perhaps a part of his liver, anything he can give, anything someone might need.

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