

“A medical crisis led me to my best friend”

We know what these six women are grateful for this holiday season: their good health, and the women who helped them get there.

BY LESLIE GOLDMAN



THE HEART SISTERS

Niki Glass (left), 38, Aurora, IL, and Karen Tompkins, 53, Hazel Crest, IL

TRY TO IMAGINE THAT YOUR HEART IS working at just 12 percent of its capacity, you're trapped in a hospital away from your family, and the thing that will save you—an entirely new heart—will only come your way if someone with a healthy one dies. Then imagine spending most of those long, fraught days waiting alone. Terrifying, right? What you'd need: a friend who *truly* gets what you're going through.

Niki Glass and Karen Tompkins had considered themselves healthy—Karen, a mom of four (ages 16 through 31), even walked eight miles every day. But the day Niki's three kids, ages 17, 13, and 11, started school last year, she began feeling short of breath. “I sent them off, went to the hospital, and never came home,” she says. Her heart failing, she was admitted to Chicago's Northwestern Memorial Hospital and placed on the transplant list. “My kids would call me every day before school. I couldn't cry—I had to keep it together—but I wasn't there to help them,” says Niki, who also has four stepkids. Three months later, Karen, with the same diagnosis, moved to the cardiac floor. It was a dark time: “I had to spend Thanksgiving in the hospital,” she says.

As the lonely days wore on, the nurses urged the two to get together. “We were both event planners, we both have lots of kids, we both love *Empire*,” Karen says. But Niki was reluctant: “I'd been on the transplant list for months and had seen people come and go. I didn't want to get attached.”

But when they finally did meet, Niki felt an instant connection. They started walking the corridors to stave off the blood clots that can form during bed rest and shuffled down

to the hospital lobby for ice cream, wearing masks and pulling their IV drips. “The cardiac floor can be depressing. But when we were together, we were just two friends going out,” Niki says. And more: “We shared our fears.” Karen adds, “Waiting for a heart feels like a death sentence. Plus, someone has to die for you to live, so you have to deal with the mental gymnastics of *that*.” They supported each other as they were forced to miss out on life's little joyful moments: As Niki's son got ready for his homecoming dance, they followed along on her iPad. When Karen's fourth grandchild was born, she watched on FaceTime and celebrated with Niki.

Karen was matched with a heart before the end of the year. She immediately went to Niki's room in tears. “I don't know how to tell you this,” she told her. “I love you so much. I don't want to leave you.” But Niki felt only happiness. “I said, ‘The heart that's made for you wasn't made for me,’” she remembers. When complications brought Karen back to the hospital, Niki sat vigil at her bedside—which is where her doctor came looking for her with big news: There was a heart for her too. “I jumped out of my bed, all these tubes still in me, and started screaming, ‘Niki got a heart!’” Karen says.

By Valentine's Day, they were both home with their families. They talk constantly, and schedule their monthly checkups for the same day so they can catch up in person. When Niki got a job as a school lunchroom supervisor, Karen was one of the first people she called. Niki knew who would get how life-affirming it was to baby-step back into the workforce. And Karen did: “She's my girl,” she says. “She's my heart sister.” ►



The Hendersons helped create two families.



The Gassmans with their kids, adopted as embryos.

AN EXTENDED FAMILY

Kelli Gassman, 49, Salem, OR, and Rebecca Henderson, 42, Tonawanda, NY

KELLI GASSMAN ALWAYS KNEW that when she had children, they'd be doted on by her little sister, Ericka. "If there was ever a baby in a room, Ericka was holding it. She was just that person," she says. Neither one of the siblings got the future she had planned on: Kelli struggled with infertility, and Ericka, at age 37, was diagnosed with breast cancer. "It was a hard time in my life," says Kelli. "I was doubly grieving, seeing my sister get closer to her passing and knowing that the possibility of children seemed to be ebbing away for me."

Across the country, Rebecca Henderson had also grappled with infertility. After 11 torturous years of trying, she had finally given birth to twins, Abigail and Rachele, through IVF. She and her husband, Chris, had 11 embryos left over, but after Rebecca's difficult pregnancy and severe postpartum

depression, "there was *no way* we could use the other embryos," she says. The couple didn't believe in destroying them or donating them for research, so they turned to embryo adoption. It's a phenomenon growing in popularity: A person or couple adopts an embryo; the adoptive mother can actually give birth to her adopted child this way.

"It sounded so sci-fi," Kelli says, but in 2011, it was an option that filled her with hope. She and her husband, Dan, signed on with the agency the Hendersons were using, Nightlight Christian Adoptions' Snowflakes Embryo Adoption program. "I loved that I could experience pregnancy, and I wanted our kids to have a relationship with their genetic family," she says. Rebecca yearned to give another family the joy she'd finally been able to find and to ease their struggles to conceive: "I know what that heartache is like," she says.

As soon as Rebecca and Chris opened up the Gassmans' file to consider them as potential recipients of their embryos, "we knew. We just *knew*," Rebecca says. "We felt the warmth coming off the pages of their story." And when they met in person right before the embryo transfer, Rebecca was even more amazed. "I don't make friends easily," she says. "And yet I felt this strong connection. We were supposed to just have dinner together, and then we ended up going to two more places to keep talking, because we weren't ready to part. I have a best friend from high school and I have my husband, but never before or since have I made a connection like the one I did with Kelli."

A contract transferred rights to all 11 embryos from the Hendersons to the Gassmans (the process cost about \$20,000, including agency and fertility clinic fees, but the Hendersons received no money themselves). Then, in January 2012, with the embryo transfer scheduled for just a few months later, Kelli's sister passed away. "The grief was devastating," Kelli says, "but I do believe that my sister and my children passed each other in heaven."

Today, the Gassmans have two children from the Hendersons' embryos: Trevor, 3, and Aubrey, 20 months. And the Hendersons have three children—after the twins, a surprise baby girl, Johanna, was born. For Rebecca, seeing the Gassman kids is complicated, but shot through with joy: "I do feel that instinctual maternal pull of knowing they are genetically mine—there's no way to be human and not feel that," she says. "You know how, as a mom, you can be thinking about a hundred things, but your children are always in your head somehow? That's how it is with Trevor and Aubrey, too. They are always there. But I am *thrilled* they are in the family they are in."

For Kelli, "It hit me, when Ericka died, that I was an only child. I wasn't looking for a replacement sister, but Rebecca has filled that role—for me, as a friend, and for all of us, by giving us aunts and uncles and cousins. It's like being grafted onto a family tree." ►

THE BFF DOWN THE BLOCK

Veronica Weeks (below left), 41, and Becky Keiper, 43, Walford, IA

MOST PEOPLE KNOCK ON THEIR NEIGHBOR'S DOOR to ask for a cup of emergency flour or to tell them they've left a light on in their car. Veronica Weeks and Becky Keiper are not ordinary neighbors, not since the day Veronica showed up on Becky's front porch with a razor in her hand and asked if she'd shave her armpits.

It did make *some* sense: Becky is a surgical nurse, and Veronica also needed help removing some surgical adhesive from her left breast. She'd recently had a lumpectomy after being diagnosed with breast cancer, and at home recovering, she'd gotten frustrated by the sticky residue and found herself determined to get her armpits, at least, back where they were before her diagnosis.

"I was on a mission," she says, and was reluctant to have her husband, Josh, give it a try. He'd taken her cancer diagnosis hard. "We heard 'cancer' and the seriousness of it hit us like a truck; we have two kids, a teenage daughter and a younger son. But I decided to treat it like a business and just deal with things," she says. So even though Veronica had only met Becky a few times around the neighborhood, she thought, *Perfect*. She got up and walked over to Becky's house, even though it took her 10 minutes instead of the 90 seconds it takes her now.

"It took guts!" Becky says of Veronica's request. "But as soon as she started talking, I could tell she wasn't going to let a cancer diagnosis take her down." Veronica whipped off her top right in the living room. "It might have been a little awkward if the UPS man had peeked through the window," says Becky, who got to work picking away at the tape. Then,

after a particularly tricky bit came off, Veronica yelped in pain and Becky said, "Sorry! Most of my patients are under anesthesia!" That's the real moment, Veronica says, that started their relationship—she needed a little down-to-earth humor in her life right then.

For weeks afterward, as Veronica went through her radiation treatments, Becky was there with her professional insight—and her friendship. "I was more terrified at that time," Veronica says. "That's when I realized that cancer can come back." The two ran errands together and talked, and Becky began bringing over dinner and pitching in at the Weekses' house so Josh could focus on Veronica and the kids. "One day I called Josh at work to say, 'You're not going to believe this, but Becky is mowing our yard.' And we have a *huge* yard," Veronica says. Becky, in turn, was constantly inspired by Veronica's spirit through it all: "She never asked for pity; she just wanted answers and friendship." When Veronica's last radiation session finally arrived, Becky was there with a bottle of champagne.

There were no signs of cancer at Veronica's last mammogram, and now the friends spend their time watching their kids play in the backyard (Becky has three, a 12-year-old son and 10-year-old twin girls) or relaxing at their neighborhood girls' night. They welcome the ordinariness of it, but haven't forgotten what brought them together: They walk in the American Cancer Society's Relay for Life, and Becky has become vigilant about her breast self-exams. Veronica hopes their unexpected neighborly bond inspires others to reach out to the woman living next door. "It amazes me now when people don't get along with neighbors, or do not know them at all. They are missing out on a friend like Becky, the kind of person who would do anything for anyone—not expecting a thank-you or a Facebook shout-out. A *true* friend." ❊



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