

Brave Hearts

A mutual love of dachshunds—
a breed known for its
courage—made Julie Michaels
and Carrie Mehdi cross
paths. But Michaels showed
some special bravery of her
own when she offered Mehdi
one of her kidneys so
she could live a longer life

Carrie Mehdi and Julie Michaels are in adjacent stalls in a Los Angeles restaurant restroom. They've just finished dinner with their husbands, where the foursome was laughing so hard the people at the next table asked what they were having. "The left kidney is working!" Mehdi yells to her neighbor. Michaels cracks up. "The right one is working over here," she says.

The knowledge that the kidney of one woman is working in the other's body is enough to make these best friends giddy. It's been that way since last July, when Mehdi's kidneys were failing and Michaels donated one of her own, saving Mehdi's life. Back then, they barely knew each other; now they rattle off a list of things they have in common. "The same political views," says Mehdi. "We don't like ice water!" Michaels adds. "Carrie used to—until she got my kidney." "We both hate clowns!" says Mehdi.

There's one other thing they share: They're positively smitten with dachshunds. President of the Dachshund Club of California, Mehdi, 49, has six standard dachshunds of her own—Annie, Chloe, Natalie, Patrick, Phineas and Noah ("because he looks like *ER*'s Noah Wylie"). Michaels, 46, has four miniatures—Chili, Mazy, WaPony and Roxy. Both women love the breed for its clever, courageous temperament—and for bringing them together.

Three years ago, when Michaels' dog Weena died from—coincidentally enough—kidney and liver failure, she chose to adopt one, WaPony, with eyesight problems. She brought the puppy to an informal dog show in July 2001, where Mehdi, who was judging the event, awarded her fourth prize. Fast forward to a breeders' club meeting in January 2002, where once again the pair never got past introductions and polite smiles.

However, Michaels could not keep her eyes off Mehdi's son, Gregory, then 17, because he was the spitting image of her own son, Andrew, 23. Later, she was chatting with a friend and kennel owner, who told her Mehdi was in desperate need of a kidney transplant. "It was as if someone whispered in my ear, 'offer yours,'" recalls Michaels. "I'd always dreamed of being a philanthropist, but I think that giving some of yourself is more special than money."

About two weeks later, Mehdi's husband, Zafar, beckoned her to listen to her voice mail message. "It said, 'Hello, this is Julie Michaels, and we met at a Sierra Dachshund Breeders Club meeting. I understand you need a kidney, and I'd be honored if you'd accept mine,'" recalls Mehdi, who was incredulous. "I played it back again and again, I was so stunned."

In 1987, Mehdi had been diagnosed with polycystic kidney disease, a genetic condition that causes the complete loss of kidney function. Her grandfather and father had died of it. She lost her brother, at age 41, to aneurysms, a complication from it. Mehdi went into renal failure in 2000 and began dialysis; a year later, she was put on the transplant program list at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) Medical Center. Fatigue had forced her to quit her job as an interior designer, but she still had enough energy for her beloved dogs.

BY NANCY COLASURDO

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PHOTOS, JIM PURDUM, HAIR AND MAKEUP, DONNA GAST.



"I feel like the luckiest person in the world," says Mehdi (left), with Michaels and (from left) Phineas, Natalie and Noah

But Mehdi could not remember who Michaels was. Nervous with excitement, she mustered the nerve to call back. Michaels told her she was an executive assistant at a medical center and had done her research; she knew what was involved and was ready to go. From then on, things moved briskly. Tests revealed their blood types were compatible. To help ensure that her organ would not be rejected, a barrage of other exams followed—so many that Michaels,

accompanied by her husband, Jeff, used almost all her vacation days to go back and forth to UCLA from her home in Placentia, 43 miles away.

And so it was that the brand-new best friends walked into the hospital on July 24 last year. Julie had laparoscopic surgery to remove her left kidney to give to Mehdi. The donor was in the hospital for two days, the recipient for six, and they loved every minute of it—really. "All those cute residents running around," says

Michaels. "A stream of Brad Pitts came into my room," Mehdi chimes in. Her new kidney started functioning almost immediately, and her energy soared. On her third day home in Los Angeles, "I practically tore the garage apart cleaning it out," she says, "the cupboards, too."

Mehdi will take anti-rejection pills for the rest of her life, but there will be no more thrice-weekly treks to dialysis for four hours at a clip. No more working it around dog shows. No more fears that she won't see her son graduate from college. Now there are phone calls to Michaels twice a week, and monthly, laughter-filled get-togethers.

"I feel like the luckiest person in the world," says Mehdi. "What did I do to deserve this? My husband thinks everything happens for a reason. That fact that I liked dachshunds from the time I was a child is what led Julie to me." Michaels chimes right in: "I lost Weena. I just happened to be into dachshunds. Our sons look alike. There's a big master picture." Now Mehdi's kidney has a nickname—Weena. Julie laughs out loud. "Weena lives on!"

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