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*This is the story of Alex Engelhardt. A story made possible by Kari Westberg.*

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Friendship, loss, and the extraordinary ways one life can touch so many others.




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# *Alex and Kari*

Alex Engelhardt grew up less than a mile from Kari Westberg. Long before cell phones and social media, the two spent their summers outdoors, running around town, playing kick the can in a nearby park known simply as "the lot," and spending time with the other neighborhood kids until the sun went down. When the school year began, the girls traded neighborhood games for volleyball practices and matches. Like most kids, they spent little time thinking about what the future might hold, content to enjoy the friendships and memories they were creating together.

What neither of them could have known was that Kari's legacy would one day change Alex's life too.

When Kari passed, it broke the town. Kari's impact was felt everywhere. During this time of heartache as the community had lost one of their own, they decided to turn their pain of losing such a young and vibrant soul into a focus on preserving Kari's memory. The neighborhood planted a tree in the park Alex and Kari had frequented as children, and the volleyball team made t-shirts with the phrase "KARI-ing On The Tradition" displayed.

A couple of years following Kari's passing, Alex and her brother Nick visited a local staple, Sister Sarah's. By chance, Alex had been at the salad bar when she met Steve Ferkau, who was in town visiting Kari's family. Standing near lettuce, cheese, and other toppings, Alex shared childhood memories with the man who now carried Kari's lungs.




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# *Kari's Klimbers*

Alex moved to Illinois for an internship before eventually settling there for her career. Even after leaving Iowa, she continued to connect with Steve through emails and letters, sharing memories of Kari and the impact she continued to have on both of their lives. And to honor Kari's gift of breath, Steve created Kari's Klimbers.

Every February, Alex and the rest of Kari's Klimbers race up 94 flights of stairs through an event orchestrated by the American Lung Association. They climb all 1,632 steps of the John Hancock Center to raise awareness for those impacted by lung diease and continue to honor Kari's lifesaving gift.

For 30 minutes, they are exhausted and gasping for air. Their lungs burn with every step they take. But they continue to climb because at every other point during the year they get to breathe normally. The climb acknowledges the struggle Steve lived with, and the gift Kari gave.



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# *Alex's Gift*

When Alex turned 26 years old, she learned Steve's anti-rejection medication had caused damage to his kidney. He would need another transplant.

Alex thought to herself:

Why not me?

She began to see if she was a candidate to become a living kidney donor.

Alex had struggled for over a decade with an unknown illness that caused debilitating symptoms, and she worried this might impact her ability to be a suitable donor. Still, she proceeded with the months of testing to see if she would be a candidate.

On her drive back to Iowa for Thanksgiving in 2011, Alex received a call that changed her life. The testing did more than confirm Alex would be a suitable kidney donor. It finally gave a name to an illness that had haunted her for years. The CT scans revealed she had MALS disease (a rare vascular compression disorder in which the diaphragms fibrous band sits too low). Alex called Steve, and when he picked up, said, "I have an A+ kidney with your name on it!" In May of 2012, the night before their surgery, Alex and Steve's families got together for dinner. During the dinner, Steve gifted Alex with a starfish necklace that included the story of the boy and the starfish.



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# *The Boy and the Starfish*

*One morning, on an East Coast beach, there was a boy. Tens of thousands of starfish had been swept onto shore the night before and were drying out in the sun. The boy began furiously flinging them back into the ocean.*

*An older man happened to also be taking a morning stroll along the same beach, and noticed the boy. He approached and asked, "What are you doing?"*

*The young boy did not stop bending to scoop the starfish into his hands and tossing them out to sea as he responded, "I am throwing the starfish back into the ocean."*

*"Why?" the older man asked.*

*"The sun is coming up. If I don't throw them back in, they will die."*

*The older man looked around. It was true the sun was coming up as the heat was beginning to warm his own cheeks. "There are 10,000 starfish out here. You cannot possibly make a difference!"*

*Despite the growing heat and sweat beginning to drip from his face, the boy picked up another starfish and tossed it into the ocean before turning to the older man and replied, "But I made a difference to that one."*




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# *Transplant Success*

The transplant surgery was a success. Alex set out hoping to change Steve's life. Instead, the donation journey changed both of theirs. Not only did her kidney save Steve's life, but the testing process led to the diagnosis and treatment of her MALS disease, bringing answers to questions she had carried for years.

It has now been over a decade since Alex's donation. She has gotten married and had children, one of whom was born with MALS disease. Thanks to her own diagnosis, they have been able to minimize any symptoms for her son. Steve and Alex remain close friends, her children fondly referring to him as "Uncle Steve."

While Steve lives in the Chicago area, he will tell anyone who listens that there must be something special about the girls who come from Iowa.

After all, one gave him the gift of breath.

The other gave him the gift of time.