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SAVING A FELLOW SURVIVOR

Minn. woman to donate kidney today after Roslindale man reaches out for help from other victims of clergy abuse



ESSDRAS M SUAREZ/GLOBE STAFF

Doctors at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center will transplant a kidney from Susan Pavlak to Phil Saviano.

By Michael Paulson
GLOBE STAFF

First, he asked his brothers. Then he turned to extended family. It was only after it became clear that no one in his family qualified to donate a kidney that Phil Saviano realized he might die. And then he turned to the one larger community that he has embraced for nearly two decades: survivors of clergy sexual abuse. Across the country, thousands of men and women who years ago were molested by priests opened their inboxes to find an e-mailed plea to help a fellow survivor. Seven of them offered up a kidney to keep Saviano alive. And today, at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, physicians will transplant a kidney from Susan Pavlak, a 55-year-old

Minnesota woman who says that years ago she was molested by a former nun at a Catholic high school, to Saviano, a 57-year-old Roslindale man who says that as a boy in Central Massachusetts he was repeatedly abused by a priest who turned out to be a serial pedophile.

"He is another member of the family of the harmed," Pavlak said yesterday, explaining why she would give a kidney to a man she had never met or even heard of. "One way I can respond is to give what I have to give."

Saviano, who established and for about a decade led the New England chapter of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), said he is still trying to make sense of all the intersecting elements of his life that have brought him to this moment.

"The challenge for me is to be able to express sufficient grat-

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itude for what's being given to me," he said. "This organization is saving my life."

Saviano already holds a prominent place in the history of the sexual abuse crisis in Massachusetts. In 1992, in an interview with the Globe, he told the public the secret he had kept hidden, even from his family, since his boyhood in East Douglas: For a year and a half, starting when he was 11 years old, he was repeatedly forced to masturbate and perform oral sex on the Rev. David A. Holley, a young priest who was later accused of molesting dozens of other boys in multiple states before finally being sentenced to 275 years in a New Mexico state prison.

Saviano was emboldened to go public by a complication: He thought he was dying. He had been living with AIDS for nearly a decade, and his body had begun to fail.

"If I had not been dying of AIDS, I would not have had the courage to come forward, but at that point my career was over, I was on my way out physically, my reputation was shot in the eyes of many people, and I didn't have a lot to lose," he said. "This was a final opportunity to effect some change and address this thing that happened to me when I was a kid."

But Saviano didn't die. His body held out long enough for scientists to find new medications that enable people with AIDS to survive, and he has.

He filed suit and won a \$12,500 settlement from the Worcester Diocese — he says it would have been slightly larger but he refused to sign a confidentiality agreement — and in 1997, at the Needham Public Library, hosted the first meeting of what became the New England chapter of SNAP.

By the time the abuse crisis broke wide open, in 2002 with a series of stories in the Globe, Saviano was ready to turn over the



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reins to others, and in recent years he has left the limelight to newer leaders.

But when his kidneys began to fail a year ago, and he realized he might not live long enough to survive the three-to-five year wait for a kidney from a deceased person — he turned to SNAP for a live donor. The first e-mail, last August, went to New England members, and prompted three volunteers, all of whom were disqualified by various medical tests; the second e-mail, in February, went to more than 8,000 survivors nationwide and generated four more kidney offers, one of them from Pavlak.

Pavlak, who lives in St. Paul, says she had been sexually abused for about four years, starting when she was 16, by a teacher at her Catholic high school who had just been released from her vows as a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet. Un-

like Saviano, who now calls himself agnostic, she is still a church-going Catholic, who maintains a cordial relationship with church officials, serves on the board that reviews abuse allegations for a monastery in Minnesota, and had tried to form an organization pushing a "non-adversarial" response to the abuse issue.

"The practice of my faith is important to me," she says. "The stupidities of it, and the imperialism of it, and the patriarchy is a problem, and it needs to change. But change can not come only from the outside — it has to come from within."

Pavlak is not a SNAP member, but she is friendly with the SNAP leadership in Minnesota, and so the e-mail (subject line: "Help for a survivor") found its way to her.

Pavlak says several factors contributed to her desire to help — her sense of kinship with other abuse survivors, the fact that she

had lost several friends to AIDS in the 1980s, hearing stories told by her sister, who directs the transplant program at a University of Minnesota hospital, and her Catholic faith.

"A lot of times, healing comes from the places where we've been hurt," she said. "Many Catholic people, including myself, have been badly hurt by folks who are in the institution, and I think some healing is owed from within the body of Christ."

Organ donations from strangers are unusual, but becoming less so — about one in five living transplants involves an unrelated donor, according to Dr. Martha Pavlakis, the medical director of kidney and pancreatic transplantation at Beth Israel Deaconess, who said, "Obviously they [Saviano and Pavlak] are linked through their group, but it's still an act of great heroism to reach out and help somebody that you

don't know!"

Pavlakis said transplants for HIV positive people are also becoming less unusual — for years, the procedure was not done, because of concerns about whether the patients could tolerate the combination of medications for the disease and the transplantation, but Beth Israel Deaconess has been at the forefront of successfully testing transplants for people with AIDS. "His prognosis is quite good," Pavlakis said.

The donation, not surprising, is the talk of the survivor of the community.

"What keeps me going every single day is seeing how extraordinarily . . . compassionate people who have every right to be consumed with bitterness are to one another," said David Clohessy, the national director of SNAP.

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