



2019

Flynn donated a kidney to Greg Dentice.



2020

Flynn (below) donated part of his liver to Richie Ramirez (above).



When **Brian Flynn** donated his kidney to a friend's brother in 2019, the experience was so gratifying that one year later he donated part of his liver—and saved a second life



By **GILLIAN TELLING**  
Photographs by **BILLY DELFS**



### Ultimate Gift

Donor Brian Flynn (left) reunites with recipients Richie Ramirez (center) and Greg Dentice. "My life is made better because of my connection to them," says Flynn.

Brian Flynn recalls the first time he considered becoming a living organ donor: about five years ago, when he stumbled across a Facebook post from a friend who needed a kidney. “I was on a business trip, and I’d maybe had a few margaritas with a colleague,” he says with a laugh. “But I thought, Why don’t I see if I’m a match?” He was—but the friend ended up getting a kidney from her husband. Then a year ago, when Flynn was turning 50, the idea popped back into his head. “I told my wife, ‘I’m feeling like I need to do more. I’m healthy—maybe I really *should* give someone a kidney!’”

Flynn has since done just that—along with donating a portion of his liver, saving the lives of two strangers 15 months apart. “Only about 50 people in the United States have been dual donors,” says Dr. Benjamin Samstein, who performed Flynn’s 2020 liver surgery. “The vast majority of donors are directed donors, so this is pretty uncommon. He’s a very generous person.” Now fully recovered from both surgeries, Flynn, 51, calls organ donation “the most rewarding thing I’ve ever done. It’s really that sense of being part of something bigger than yourself.”

It was the spring of 2019 when Flynn’s wife, Amy, first told him about another Facebook post she’d seen from their daughter’s basketball coach, whose 23-year-old brother Greg Dentice had been living with kidney failure for more than a decade. Dentice had developed a kidney infection at age 11, and it had never fully gone away, leaving him in desperate need of a transplant. (One doctor hypothesized it stemmed from a bout of strep.) “Brian saved my life,” says the cable technician, 25, who got married last October. “The week of the transplant, I had about 10 percent kidney function and was about to start dialysis. But it also changed my



### A Tragic Loss—and an Inspiration

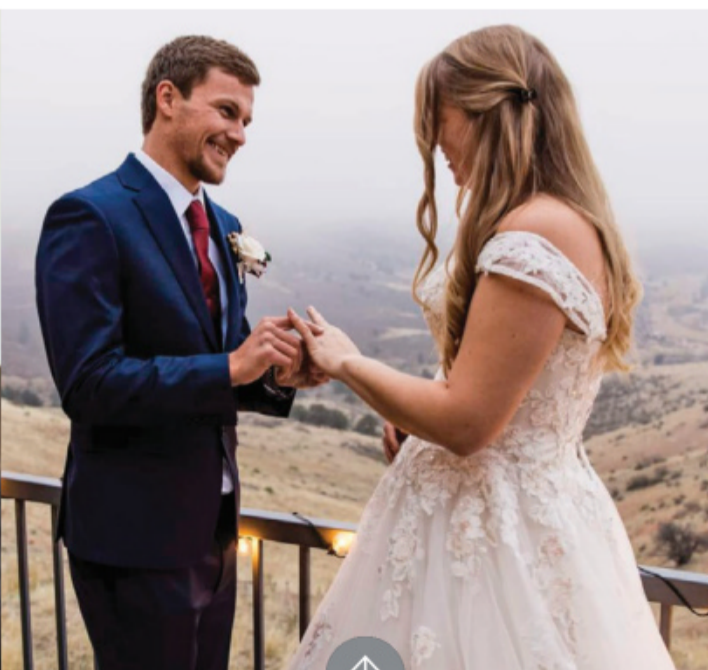
When Brian Flynn was 19, his older brother J.P. was killed in the Pan Am Flight 103 terrorist bombing on his way back from studying in London. “It had a huge effect on my life,” says Flynn. “He was kind, the type of man who would have made a difference. [His death] made me think, What are you going to do with your life to make a difference?”

## Life After Surgery



### Richie Ramirez

Other than a hernia from the surgery, the 4-year-old has had no complications. “He’s his bubbly, smart, hysterical self,” says his mom, Melissa.



### Greg Dentice

“It’s been an emotional roller coaster,” says Dentice, who got married to Sabrina in October. “I owe Brian my life.”



### The Flynns

"I've been very lucky," says Brian (with Bo, Amy and Hedda in 2019). "My family has been so supportive."



outlook on the world, just to know there are good people out there who would do this for someone."

Flynn, who lives with Amy and their kids Bo, 17, and Hedda, 15, in New York's Catskills region, says he wasn't anxious about the surgery. "I was more worried for Greg and hoping it would work," he recalls. "Knowing that someone's life is going to be saved helps make it not about you." The morning after the transplant, Flynn walked to Dentice's room, where his family wept with gratitude. "I mean, I cry at a good Nike commercial, but yeah, it was very emotional," says Flynn. "It was a very powerful moment."

But it would be just the beginning of Flynn's donor journey. After his recovery, Dentice jokingly texted him about liver donation, in which a part of a donor's liver (which regenerates in about a year's time) is transplanted to a recipient. "Are you going to do that next?" he teased. But having recently lost his close friend and religious counselor, a Capuchin monk named Father Philip Bohan, to COVID-19, Flynn says he was motivated to give even more. "Father Phil had been a guiding light in my life, who spent his entire life serving the poor," says Flynn. "I was thinking about the pandemic and thinking, 'Maybe I can do something extraordinary and try to do it twice.' And also, being a little hypercompetitive, I decided to challenge myself and see what I could do."

Not far away, in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, Melissa and Richard Ramirez were struggling with the news that their goofy, high-spirited son Richie, now 4, had been diagnosed with Alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency, a genetic condition that was causing his liver to fail. "He was our miracle baby," says Melissa, 39, of Richie, who was born after their third and final round of IVF. They were told a liver transplant would be

their best chance at giving Richie a long, healthy life. "We thought, 'Okay, maybe that will happen when he is a teenager,'" Melissa says, assuming they would manage his condition with medications in the meantime.

But then, in October, they received a call saying there had been a perfect match from an anonymous donor. Flynn, a manufacturing executive who was at work at one of his factories, got the call too. When they asked how soon he could come in, "I was like, 'Um, I guess a week?'" The surgery was scheduled 10 days later. "We weren't ready yet!" says Richard, 41, a carpenter. "But when are you ever ready?" The Ramirezes were shocked that a total stranger would make such a sacrifice. (As carriers of the deficiency gene, they couldn't donate, and neither could other family members.) "Who knew there were amazing people who would do something like that?" Melissa says. Flynn remained an anonymous donor until after the Nov. 3 operation, which was a success. "I remember crying, knowing that somewhere there was this person who was donating their liver to our son," says Melissa. When a social worker told the Ramirezes that Flynn was open to correspondence, she wrote him a letter from Richie's bedside. Flynn sobbed when he got it. "I was just overwhelmed," he says. "Overwhelmed with gratitude that it happened and that Richie was okay. And hearing his story and how difficult it was living with this disease, and what his parents had been going through, and how appreciative they were. It really was just a great moment in life."

One day in January, almost three months after Richie's transplant, Flynn met with the Ramirez family for the first time and reunited with Greg Dentice for a *People* photo shoot. The new friends hope telling their story will inspire others to become living donors. Richard Ramirez says he was at a loss for words upon meeting Flynn. "He basically saved our son's life and gave him a chance to grow up to be a man one day. So it's difficult to know what to say," he says. "I just said, 'Thank you. Thank you so much.'" Adds Melissa: "There really are no words. Last week in school, they did a lesson about neighborhood heroes. All the kids were writing thank-you notes to doctors and firefighters. Richie said, 'Mine is to Brian.'" But Flynn says he's the one who's grateful. "The idea of saving a life is tremendous, but it's also tremendous how it can make you feel—and how it can make *your* life better." ●

## How to Be a Living Donor

Healthy adults can potentially donate some organs and tissue to others. Donors undergo both physical and psychological testing and should be between 18 to 60 years of age and physically healthy. "If we think of ourselves as a community that we give to, the way Brian does, the community will give back to us if we ever need it," says Dr. Benjamin Samstein, Brian's liver surgeon. For more information, visit [organdonor.gov](http://organdonor.gov).