

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

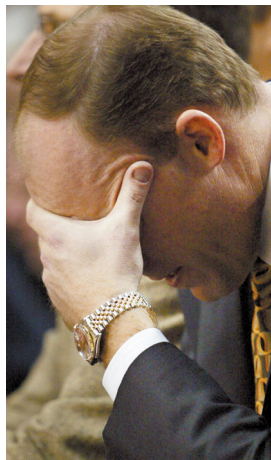
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"No excuses. I didn't get the job done," coach says after 9-16 start.

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'SOMETHING GOD WANTED TO HAPPEN'



Thanks to Juan and Leigh Anne Uribe (above), Gail Fink of Northbrook got the kidney she needed to live — and the children she'd been trying to have.

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Michael and Gail Fink hold their twin sons Elliot (left) and Ethan (right). The 2-month-old twins were carried to term by surrogate Leigh Anne Uribe. | RICH HEIN~SUN-TIMES

The greatest gifts

'IT'S JUST AMAZING' | In an extraordinary sacrifice, a man donates a kidney to a Northbrook woman, then his wife serves as surrogate mother for her twins

BY DAVE NEWBART

Staff Reporter/dnewbart@suntimes.com

Three years ago, Gail Fink desperately needed a kidney to live.

The Jewish marketing manager from the north suburbs posted an urgent plea asking for the "biggest gift of all" on a Web site set up to match living donors with those in need of an organ. That same day, Juan Uribe, a Hispanic Pentecostal minister then living in Texas, checked the Web site after reading a newspaper story about it.

What transpired over the next three years, both families now believe, is nothing short of miraculous.

Not only did Juan Uribe extend Gail Fink's life by donating one of his kidneys to her. But when Gail sought a surrogate mother because her condition left her unable to get pregnant, Juan's wife, Leigh Anne, agreed to be a surrogate.

She delivered twins Elliot and Ethan Fink at Evanston Northwestern Hospital two months ago.

Why did the Uribes go to such lengths for strangers? "This is something that God wanted to happen," Juan, 43, says.

He notes that they received some benefit as well. Leigh Anne, 33, a former linguist in the Army, was spared a second tour in Iraq because she had to care for their three children while Juan recovered from a hernia at the site of the transplant incision.

Gail also sees God as playing a big role in her turn of fortune. Speaking as Elliot fell asleep in her arms at the Finks' Northbrook home, Gail, 47, says of the events that not only saved her life but also gave her and husband Michael, 49, two beautiful baby boys: "It's been miraculous."

Both families credit *Matching Donors.com*. The Massachusetts-based site has led to 64 organ donations in three years, according to founder Paul Dooley. He says donors and recipients typically become close, but what the Uribes have done for the Finks is "extraordinary."

Her doctors can't say for sure, but they think it was Gail's desire to have children that might have triggered her life-threatening condition. She married Michael, a planner for United Airlines, in 2003. After trying unsuccessfully to get pregnant, she underwent three rounds of in vitro fertilization. In the summer of 2004, her kidneys



Michael and Gail Fink hold their twin sons Elliot (left) and Ethan. | RICH HEIN~SUN-TIMES

began to fail, and she started dialysis.

She was told it could take 10 years to get a kidney through the government-sanctioned United Network for Organ Sharing. But a specialist told her she probably had 5½ years to live.

"It was devastating," she says.

A friend volunteered to be an organ donor but wasn't a good candidate. Gail looked for alternatives. At first skeptical, she ultimately decided to post on *MatchingDonors.com*.

At the time, the Uribes lived on the Army base in Fort Hood, Texas. A relative had sent them a newspaper story. On the inside page was an unrelated article about *Matching Donors.com*. Juan checked the Web site. Fink's profile stood out, particularly because she was trying desperately to have a family.

"My heart went out to her," he says. "Her profile struck a chord with me."

The families met, and Juan agreed to see if he was a medical match. The native of the Dominican Republic was rejected at first, but a retest came out OK. The families grew close. He started to believe this was meant to be.



Michael Fink (from left), Leigh Anne Uribe, Gail Fink and Juan Uribe.

"Here is a person from a different culture and race and different background," he says. "We live 12 hours apart. I'm Christian, and she's Jewish. I'm thinking, 'God must be up to something.'"

In April 2005, the Uribes and their children came to Chicago for the procedure at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. The Uribes' expenses were covered by the Finks, insurance and donations. Juan remembers Gail thanking him before surgery, saying, "I love you." He

replied, "Thank God. I was just an instrument."

The transplant went well, though Gail ended up hospitalized three times. Juan later developed a hernia at the wound site and was in pain for months. Leigh Anne's Army unit then got called up to Iraq (she had served there in early 2004). But she got a hardship discharge because Juan couldn't take care of their kids by himself — "a blessing," she says.

Once better, Gail again began

planning a family. But she needed an egg donor and a surrogate mother. Her condition and medications made it impossible to produce viable eggs and risky to get pregnant. A friend volunteered to donate the eggs. They began looking for a surrogate. Gail thought: What about Leigh Anne? She worried it was too much to ask. But, shortly after a one-year celebration of the transplant, the families went on vacation together in Georgia. There, Gail asked. Leigh Anne said she didn't think she could.

The next week, though, Leigh Anne prayed until she said God gave her a sign. "It seemed like I was supposed to do this for them," she says.

The embryos were created with Michael Fink's sperm and the donated eggs. After two tries, they got the news on Feb. 28, the anniversary of the death of Gail Fink's father, who also suffered renal failure: Leigh Anne was pregnant. Gail says she got out of her car at the top of a downtown parking lot "and just started screaming."

The Finks flew to Tennessee, where the Uribes now lived, for several prenatal appointments. Leigh Anne, who was paid for her role as surrogate, agreed to deliver the babies in Chicago because Illinois law allowed Gail to be listed as the mother, so no adoption would be necessary.

Because of the pregnancy's high-risk nature, Leigh Anne moved temporarily to Chicago in July. Her family stayed with her till August, when they went home to Tennessee for school. Juan quit his job as a car salesman to care for the kids.

The months apart were hard. "It was a sacrifice," says Juan, now looking for a job while working as a volunteer minister.

On Oct. 24, Leigh Anne gave birth to the twins, with Gail there in the delivery room.

"I was blessed to see them so blessed," Leigh Anne says.

Juan attended the boys' *bris* — the Jewish ritual circumcision — and the Finks made the Uribes the boys' emergency legal guardians.

The families have traveled to see each other at least 17 times over three years.

"Juan gave the gift of life to me," Gail says. "Leigh Anne feels her life was saved by not having to go to Iraq. She gave us twins, two new lives, giving Michael and I a family life.

"It's just amazing."