



## **She helped her husband get a kidney. Now, their foundation helps others with their transplant needs.**

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While most people flinch when asked to fundraise, Jackie Hutz, 60, of Butler, embraces it. “That’s one of the gifts I have. It’s easy for me, and I know it’s not easy for other people.”

After spending weeks or months planning and hosting a Night at the Races, craft show or a popular purse bash, she has no trouble giving away the proceeds to those on the receiving or giving end of organ transplantation. “Until every person on the transplant list can receive an organ in a timely manner,” she said, “I will continue to do the wildest and craziest events to raise awareness and funds.”

She realized the need on a personal level. In 2015, her husband, Bill, age 60 at the time, learned he needed a kidney transplant. He was experiencing renal failure, and his health was steadily declining. Prior to performing a transplant, Allegheny Health Network required the Hutzes to have \$25,000 set aside for expenses not covered by medical insurance.

### **good fundraiser**

Concerns about his deteriorating health and the search for a kidney donor kept them up at night, but raising \$25,000 wasn’t an issue. “It seemed like a lot of money, and it is, but I didn’t have any fear about that. That part didn’t scare me,” she said. She’s an organizer by nature. She kicked off with a spaghetti dinner. A purse bash was next with several high-end women’s purses — from brands Coach, Michael Kors, Kate Spade — raffled off at a North Hills restaurant.

“We had seating for 180, and 227 people showed up. We ran out of chairs, we ran out of tables, we ran out of food, and people still say its the best thing they ever went to,” she said. During the 2½-year wait for a kidney, she and friends raised \$42,000.

Finally, on May 31, 2018, her husband received a kidney from a living donor, Oma Palmer of Chattanooga, Tenn. “My ex-husband’s sister

donated her kidney to my new husband,” Mrs. Hutz said. “I couldn’t believe it.” Her husband’s health improved significantly.



Jackie and Bill Hutz just before Bill was approved for his transplant in 2018.  
(Courtesy of Jackie Hutz)

By Thanksgiving of that year, Mrs. Hutz was counting her blessings, but a nagging thought compelled her to do more. “It hurt me to my core that somebody else could be denied the gift of life because they didn’t have the money,” she said. She told her husband, “Honey, don’t buy me anything for Christmas. Put money toward forming our own nonprofit.”

In March 2019, the Team Fishguy Transplant Foundation was granted its 501(c)(3) nonprofit status. The Hutzes are its co-founders.

Its board of trustees consists of friends, family and Dr. Nimish Naik, Mr. Hutz’s kidney doctor. “Fishguy” is a tribute to Mr. Hutz’s 30-year career installing and maintaining fish aquariums. Mrs. Hutz said Team Fishguy’s goal was twofold – to raise funds to give to others and to raise awareness of donor need.

According to Donate Life America, a transplant advocacy group, more than 110,000 men women and children currently await a lifesaving organ. Only 58% of adults are registered as organ donors. Team Fishguy helps register donors at each of its events, adding 20 names last year. This year, its goal is to add an additional 25. The foundation also has held blood drives and works with state legislators and others to raise awareness of donor need.

In November 2019, the newly formed Team Fishguy began fundraising. COVID-19 threw a wrench in the plans and social distancing requirements forced them to get creative.

A purse bash was moved to a drive-in movie theater. More than 170 women sat in their cars hoping to snag a luxurious Brahmin handbag at the Starlight Drive-in in Butler. The winning names blared through the cars’ radios. Mrs. Hutz said participants, after enduring a year of the pandemic, were eager to get out of the house. “Women just threw money at us,” she said with a laugh. Nearly \$10,000 was raised. To date, despite the pandemic, Team Fishguy has raised more than \$17,000. It has given away more than \$11,000.

“Success to me isn’t about the money raised. It’s about the lives we can help be changed by that organ transplant. Money is only one part of the plan,” Mrs. Hutz said.

Team Fishguy works closely with Allegheny Health Network, UPMC and the National Kidney Foundation for referrals of patients in need. Other times, the organization learns of them through social media. Mrs. Hutz wants to help each one. “None of them have an easy path. None of them.”



Team Fishguy founders Jackie and Bill Hutz whisper to Santa in December 2018 that they'd like a nonprofit organization for Christmas.  
(Courtesy of Jackie Hutz)

In late December 2019, she saw a local news story of a 42-year-old woman in Butler in need of a kidney. By chance, in Conway, Beaver County, Cheyenne Frappier, 28, saw the same news story. Both women acted on it.

Team Fishguy made its first donation, a \$500 check, to cover the woman's pre-surgery costs. Frappier felt compelled to donate a kidney. After a 10-page application and months of testing, she was approved as donor.

Ironically, both she and Mrs. Hutz assumed the Butler woman was local, just north of Pittsburgh. They soon learned she was from Butler County, Ohio, just north of Cincinnati, five hours away. Frappier was still onboard. "I was already invested in her at that point," she said. The single mom was prepared to travel but not prepared for the expense.

As the donor, she was required to stay near the Christ Hospital in Cincinnati for a week before and 10 days after surgery. She posted financial concerns on social media. "I knew right away I could not afford 18 days in a city hotel. I figured I'm going to be doomed," she said. Medical procedures are covered through the transplant recipient's insurance, but travel expenses — including hotel costs, gas and food — are not.

By chance, Mrs. Hutz saw her posts and reached out. Frappier said, "I get a random message from a stranger saying, 'Hey, I can help with your stay. Give me a call.'" They connected. Mrs. Hutz placed dozens of phone calls and lined up a Springhill Suites Marriott hotel room minutes from the hospital. Team Fishguy paid most of the hotel bill and persuaded the Marriott to write off the balance. Frappier said, "I'm just forever grateful for her. It's crazy Team Fishguy goes out of their way to help other people."

The nonprofit has paid two months' rent, phone bill and car payments for a kidney transplant patient. Another family received six weeks' worth of food, gas and parking while their child awaits a bone marrow transplant in Philadelphia. A Johnstown man remains in Pittsburgh since February awaiting a five-organ transplant. Team Fishguy covers transportation costs to and from home for his family. It has helped several others and intends to reach more.

On Aug. 6, Team Fishguy will host a Family Fun Day at Mars-Bethel Golf in Adams. Events will include a petting zoo, a stilt walker, miniature golf and a \$10,000 hole-in-one challenge. "It's a 135-yard shot. It's doable. We want someone to win," Mrs. Hutz said.

A “car smash fundraiser” at the Saxonburg Oktoberfest is on the horizon. “Details, details, those are still being worked out,” she said with a laugh. She said it will involve a clunker car, a sledgehammer and pent-up frustration. “We make every event fun because transplants are so serious.”

More information about the Team Fishguy Transplant Foundation and upcoming events can be found at [teamfishguy.com](http://teamfishguy.com) and on [its Facebook page](#).

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