

EXCLUSIVE: JOY FOR TRANSPLANT COUPLE

A YEAR AGO I GAVE CHRIS MY KIDNEY.. NOW I'M HIS WIFE

**By Justine Smith And Beth Neil 13/07/2007 – as reported by
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WHEN Anna Pearce walked down the aisle yesterday, it really was a case of what's mine is yours...

That's because the happy couple tied the knot exactly one year to the day after Anna saved groom Chris Howard's life - by giving him one of her kidneys.

Watched by 25 close friends and family at an intimate register office ceremony, Anna, 24, and Chris, 48, exchanged vows and are now bound by a second, life-long commitment.

"This date is just so important to us," said Anna, who wore an ivory, lace dress. "July 12 last year was when our lives changed for ever. It was scary but giving Chris one of my kidneys cemented our bond and made us realise how much we mean to each other. Marrying exactly a year later is a celebration of our love and of getting our lives back. I'm overjoyed to be marrying Chris but to see him in good health is the greatest gift."

Beaming Chris, who wore a pale summer suit, lifted Anna in his arms after the ceremony, in Leatherhead, Surrey, and said: "I can't believe we've done it. Anna looks amazing. I can't take my eyes off her. I thought this day would never come and now I feel on top of the world. I have my new wife, health and freedom. She has given me all that and I just can't thank her enough. It's incredible to think I'm standing here with her kidney inside me. I am the luckiest man alive."

Anna had always been aware of Chris's kidney problems since they met and fell in love six years ago. Both knew that polycystic kidney disease meant Chris would eventually need dialysis and a transplant, although doctors didn't expect either to be necessary until much later on. However, two years into their relationship, his health deteriorated and by 2004 his kidneys began to fail.

Conscious of the 24-year age gap between himself and Anna, Chris feared the toll his illness would take on his girlfriend. Constantly sick and lethargic, selfless Chris didn't want to see Anna give up her best years caring for him. And he was adamant their marriage plans should be shelved until his health improved.

Anna said: "We always knew we wanted to wed but he wouldn't do it while he was so sick, because he didn't want me to feel trapped.

"He was exhausted all the time, sleeping 14 hours a day. He had been doing the Knowledge to become a London taxi driver but had to give it up." Chris's condition became so serious that he required dialysis, which involved three hospital visits a week for four-hour sessions attached to a blood-cleansing machine.

Anna was working full-time for a London fashion house but every spare minute was spent visiting Chris in hospital.

She remembers: "We'd meet people there who had been on dialysis for 10 years or more, waiting for a transplant. We both knew that could happen with Chris." Desperate to see the man she loved fit and well again, Anna offered to be screened to see if she was a match. When the results came back positive, she was determined to go ahead and donate a kidney to Chris, despite his protests. He felt it was a sacrifice too far. "But I didn't think twice," she said. "Chris has a small family and his father is 87, so I was his best bet.

"When I learned that I was a match, the doctors sent me for counselling to make sure it was what I really wanted. Chris tried to put his foot down, saying he loved me too much to put me through it and that a donor would come up eventually. But it might have taken a decade or more and, to me, that would have been 10 years wasted."

The night before the three-hour operations, at St George's Hospital in South London, Anna admits she was a bag of nerves.

"Yes, I was really scared but it didn't last and I've never looked back. It was so emotional saying goodbye as we were led off for the operations." Both procedures went well, though Chris says that he and Anna were feeling very rough when they were reunited the next day. But we had a kiss and a cuddle, and the day after that we went home to start our new lives together," he said. They say that if you are doing well after 12 months, then it has been a success. And this is a great way to celebrate that anniversary!"

Today, Chris only needs check-ups every five weeks and now that he's off dialysis, the couple, from Walton-on-the-Hill, Surrey, can indulge in their love of travelling again. Their honeymoon will be three blissful weeks in Thailand and they are already planning a trip to Australia next year.

Anna said: "After everything that's happened, we have a new approach to life. Chris could conceivably get ill again, so we now want to make the most of every day. It feels so good to know I have been able to give the man I love a part of me and, with it, the chance of a full and healthy life. We're just so lucky I was a match. There are thousands of people out there who aren't so lucky and that's why we're supporting the Daily Mirror's Be 1 In A Million campaign.

"Hundreds of lives could be saved if everyone took the time to talk it through with their families and make the decision to sign up with the donor register."