I married my wife on May 29. Three weeks later, I was lying in a New York City hospital recovery room. My new mother-in-law was a few beds away, my kidney flushing toxins from her body.

When my wife, Shelly Banjo, and I began dating six years ago, I learned that polycystic kidney disease ran in her family. It is a genetic disease where cysts grow on kidneys, eventually destroying them. Shelly’s mother, Batya Banjo, would eventually need a kidney transplant. Some day, Shelly also might need one.

Now, Batya refers to me affectionately as her new son and “kidney buddy.” I’ll be thinking about her, recovering back at her home in Texas, as I run the New York City Marathon on Sunday.

A year and a half ago, I proposed to Shelly on a bench in Central Park, where we have trained together for marathons. Soon after, I decided to get tested to see if her mother and I were the same blood type, the first round in qualifying as a kidney donor.

Batya is 69 years old and grew up in Israel. She met her husband, Chaim, at Hebrew University, where they were biochemistry lab partners. They got married, moved to Canada for medical school and then to Dallas, where they started a medical practice and raised three daughters.

In the summer of 2013, the whole family flew to Israel, where we piled in a van and toured the state for two weeks. Only then did I truly understand who kept the family ticking. Batya chimed in when Shelly’s dad forgot the punch line of a joke, sewed torn
backpacks and jeans for her daughters, and never ceased giving her family advice—even when it wasn’t sought. That trip was the last time Batya felt healthy. Soon after, her kidneys started failing.

Currently about 120,000 Americans are on the waiting list for a new organ, according to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services’ Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network. The majority of them need kidneys. More than 4,000 people died while waiting for a new kidney last year.

Finding a willing, qualified donor is difficult. Living donation rates have fallen steadily for the past decade, according to a study in the American Journal of Transplantation. Roughly half of all living donations in 2014 were from blood relatives.

Shelly and her family worked for three years to find a kidney donor. For a while, I mostly did what any supportive partner would do: I tried to be a good listener and provide comfort. At first, a handful of close friends came forward, but none qualified. We widened the search on Facebook and Twitter. My aunt graciously agreed to be tested, insisting her nephew’s children grow up with all their grandparents. She also didn’t qualify.

By the middle of 2015, Batya’s kidneys were functioning at only around 10%. Complete strangers volunteered to donate. That prompted me to step up. If someone could elect to give a kidney to a stranger, I could at least try to give my kidney to the woman who would soon be my new mother-in-law.

In June 2015, Shelly’s sister Hili got married, but Batya was too sick to walk her daughter down the aisle. Soon after, I got the results back from my first round of tests. My blood
type, A-positive, was compatible with Batya's. I could go on to round two.

A frustrating quirk of the hospital system is that only one potential donor at a time can go through the second qualification round. Several candidates were in the pipeline for further testing at that point. I stood down.

In January, the 11th potential donor to be rejected, a young, energetic guy in his early 30s, was especially painful. Our wedding was five months away, and Batya's kidneys were failing. “It was a low point,” Batya told me months later. “That’s when I started to get desperate.”

I scheduled my second round of tests, including a battery of X-rays, scans and a psychological evaluation. Shelly and I kept it a secret from everyone so we wouldn’t raise hopes.

Two weeks later, we found out I was a match. When we called Shelly’s family, her typically outspoken mother was speechless—something I had never experienced before. “I was in shock,” she said later. “I couldn’t even process it.”

Batya would sometimes say she didn’t want to take a kidney from me. Although living-donor fatalities are rare, she said she would never forgive herself if she took her daughter’s husband away. Eventually, her doctor told her she had to take the kidney or die trying to find another one.

The period leading up to our May wedding was a bizarre mix of decisions and questions: Which shade of purple should the napkins at the reception be? “What do you mean I can’t get life insurance because I’m about to donate my kidney?”
My parents peppered me with questions, then enveloped me in a bear hug and said I made them proud. When I told one friend at a sports bar filled with rowdy hockey fans, he teared up. Another friend nearly fainted on the floor of a Walgreens. “I don’t deal well with hospital stuff,” he said, “but that’s awesome, man.”

Their reactions scared me. The doctors had told me to expect a relatively minor procedure with a quick recovery. They said the scar would be barely noticeable. In my mind, it was low-risk, high-reward.

At times, Batya seemed actually to feel better, although her medical charts suggested otherwise. On our wedding day, she helped escort Shelly down the aisle and danced a wicked hora at the reception. Of the 135 wedding guests, I bet fewer than half knew I would be donating my kidney to her. We didn’t advertise it.

The day of the surgery, June 16, began early. At 5:30 a.m., we met Shelly’s family and walked together to the hospital, all dressed in pajamas and sweatpants. As we left my mother-in-law’s apartment building, Shelly’s father told the doorman, “We’re all up early to play basketball.”

Reality hit at the hospital. “Who’s your medical proxy should something happen during the surgery?” a nurse asked. “Shelly, yes my wife, Shelly,” I said. That began a very scary and real conversation with my wife of three weeks over our diverging views about life support.

Soon, a pair of residents escorted me through a narrow, brightly-lit hallway to a pair of massive metal doors. Knock, knock. “The patient is here,” one of the residents yelled.

As they prepared me for anesthesia, a resident asked about my heart rate. At around 40 beats a minute, it was low but typical for a marathoner.

After the 90-minute operation, they took me to a recovery room, where my heart rate promptly dropped below 27. I was in more pain than the doctors expected. The anesthesiologists wanted to give me more drugs. I just wanted to see Shelly. When she came in, she had the same huge smile as when we stood together under our wedding canopy. My heart rate began to climb. The pain medication kicked in. I started to feel better.

Batya’s surgery lasted about three hours. We had been in different operating rooms but were sent to the same recovery room, a few beds apart. Her new kidney started working immediately. The nurses wheeled me next to her. She smiled, grabbed my hand and said, “You saved my life.”

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http://www.wsj.com/articles/my-wifes-mother-needed-a-kidney-and-i-was-a-match-1477927687