

Episode Title: ONE WOMAN'S STORY OF COURAGE

Guest: Kari Kirkland

Episode Link: <https://grownasswoman.guide/episode176/>

Jackie MacDougall: So take me back to that January. Had kidney donation ever been on your radar?

Kari Kirkland: The only reason it had been on my radar at all was because I had a high school friend that I knew who donated to her husband's, boss, or co worker. I think when I heard her story, I was like, wow, that is, like, such a huge thing to do for someone who's not family. And it didn't occur to me, nor did I have the reason, resources at hand to know that it was even an option for me to do an altruistic donation. It just wasn't something I knew about. Now I know so much more, and I know that. Gosh. Ask me anything. Ask me anything about donating a kidney.

Jackie MacDougall: Oh, and I will.

Kari Kirkland: Great.

Jackie MacDougall: While you're listening to this episode, there's a good chance today's guest is getting close to the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro, the highest mountain in the world. Standing at 19,341ft, she's joining dozens of others, some also kidney donors, organ recipients, doctors, nurses, and advocates to bring awareness to the importance of living organ donation. The group is expected to reach the top on March 9, 2023, also known as World Kidney Day. This episode is part of a series for March National Kidney Month, a topic that's very personal to me. My middle son is 17 years old and just days away from being added to the kidney transplant list, something that has surprised us and yet has been a long time coming. Since the moment we were told that this was necessary, I have spent hours upon hours reading and researching and have learned so much about not only what he'll have to go through, but what being a kidney donor even looks like and what it may entail. And I have to tell you, it's eye opening. Now, you might not be on the same path as my family is right now. I get that. But keep listening, because there's so much to learn and

understand about kidney donation. And if this inspires them to look into becoming an organ donor, that would be incredible. But my goal here is education, because approximately 100,000 people are on the kidney transplant list, and 13 die each day waiting for an organ. Knowledge is power, and when we are educated, it not only helps decrease the medical disinformation that's out there in the world, but we can also best support the donors and recipients in our lives relatives, friends, coworkers, community members in a more impactful way. And there's nothing more grown ass than that.

This is the Grown-Ass Woman's Guide. I'm your host, Jackie MacDougall.

Today, you'll meet Kari Kirkland. Kari's lived a fascinating life. She's been an artist, performer, wedding and event planner, private chef, flying trapeze artist, ironman triathlete, and vocalist. She's lived in four countries on three continents, is a dual citizen in Canada and the US. And has traveled the world. Clearly, adventure is not new to carry.

Kari Kirkland: There's too many fun things to do. And life is very short, but it's also very long. There's a lot of time. You can do a lot of things. And I had watched friends just go down the path of go to university and then do the same job for many, many years. And some were happy and a lot weren't. I have always kind of had this ethos of like, you do what's in front of you. I don't try to look too far into the future. And I didn't go to college. I graduated high school. And then it was like, okay, you're in the world now. I left home at a very young age. I always supported myself. I always made sure that I had my shit together, and I'm not going to be one of these people out in the world who can't take care of themselves. And so that kind of led me down all these different paths to say, like, hey, you see that thing? You could do that thing. Let's do that thing for a while. And then I did that thing. I mean, flying trapeze in particular came about simply because I took my friend to a class for her birthday because no one else would take her. No one else wanted to go with her. I went we both did the class in your first class. When you do flying trapeze pretty much anywhere recreationally in the world, you do what's called a knee hang. You hang by your knees upside down, and you reach out and there's a catcher on the other end. And that person catches you and you go flying off into their

arms, and the world becomes a different place. Well, the person that caught me happened to be the owner of the school, and he became my husband one year to the day later.

Jackie MacDougall: Oh my gosh.

Kari Kirkland: Yeah. So because that was his business, he had started a flying trapeze and aerial art school in Seattle just a couple of years before we met. And as soon as I tasted flight, I was like, yeah, this is for me. And so I basically ran away and joined the circus and married the ringmaster.

Jackie MacDougall: In January 2021, Kari got a notification on her phone that would change the trajectory of her life.

Kari Kirkland: I was on a walk with my husband, and I heard this ping. And I was like, okay, I'm going to check my phone. I don't usually do that. And I sat down. There was a little bench, and I sat down and I read this thing. And I was like, yes. And there's a knowing that I've tried to explain it's like a weird woo woo thing where I just knew. I said to my husband, I was like, is this crazy? And he said, yes, but you're going to do it anyway, so let's get on with it.

Jackie MacDougall: He knew who he married.

Kari Kirkland: He knew. He knew. He definitely knew. And after we talked about it. He said he also he knew instantly, he knew that it was going to be me. I knew it was going to be me before I even got tested. I got tested, I think, the next day after we talked to Rob and Lynn and waited for the results. And two days later, it's like, yes, you can move forward.

Jackie MacDougall: Kari's recipient wasn't a family member. He wasn't even a close friend.

Kari Kirkland: So it's an acquaintance. We're not super close, but close enough that he's another musician. His band had played at our wedding, and we knew them sort of through our work with the trapeze studio because they played a lot of our shows. We had big, massive circus shows and then an after party with live music, and they did a lot of that after party stuff because they're kind of an electro pop, DJ, synth, awesome, fun party band. So that's how I knew them. I knew that Robert, who is my recipient, I knew that he had recently gotten on the national registry. He had gotten accepted onto the list to be a recipient. But that sort of celebratory moment was stifled when he found out that he was about 97,000 on the list.

Jackie MacDougall: Wow.

Kari Kirkland: So getting on the list is a huge and hard thing, but then finding out, oh, yeah, actually, this is probably not going to happen. You know, I had been sort of following their story a little bit. It still didn't occur to me like, hey, this guy needs a kidney. You should do something, until they asked, because you're going through your life, you're doing your own stuff. And also it was the pandemic. Your mind is on other things. But when I saw their post, I knew they're the kind of people that would not feel comfortable putting that out there. They're very selfless people and very generous people themselves. And I knew, if this is going out on Facebook, this is a big deal, this is a problem. This is something very serious. And they had asked if anyone in their circle would be willing to get tested, because all of the people that could be tested in their closer circle had already been tested and they weren't a match. It's a really basic blood test just to figure out your blood type and see if you're compatible with your recipient. It's like a marker to say who you are.

Jackie MacDougall: Right. I'm going to ask questions even though I know the answer to some of these questions. I'm asking them anyway. But does that mean that you have to have the same blood type as.

Kari Kirkland: The recipient if you're the same blood type? Yeah, it can usually work, but I'm a universal blood type, so it was okay to move forward right away.

Jackie MacDougall: Side note here, according to kidney.org, donors with blood type O can donate to recipients with all different blood types, A, B, AB and O. And once the blood type compatibility is done, it's time for the next steps.

Kari Kirkland: So then it gets into a little bit more of more in depth testing, so more blood tests, a lot of psychological screening, which kind of feels like therapy in a good way. And then once you go through all those things, basically what they need to find out is whether or not there's a high chance your recipient is going to reject your organ. So you have to get a lot of different things analyzed with your blood. So there are a lot of blood draws. And then once you sort of get past that, then there's an in person testing day where you do a Fasting. They do glucose levels. Urine testing. You also have to do before that, you have to do what's called a 24 hour urine test. So you collect your urine for 24 hours in a jug and make sure that you keep it refrigerated and that no one puts anything in it or take anything out of it.

Jackie MacDougall: Okay.

Kari Kirkland: They're measuring the output, like your current output, but also all the different components of your urine.

Jackie MacDougall: Okay.

Kari Kirkland: So they want to know things like how well does your kidney process protein? Is there any protein in your urine? Is there any blood in your urine? Is there any discharge or anything like that that they need to be aware of? And once you kind of get through that, then you move on to your in person. And your in person, like I said, involves a glucose test, fasting test. On that day, they took about 18 vials of blood. Wow. Yeah. Urine samples. And then you do a CT scan of your abdomen, and you do a heart scan. I can't remember what that's called. Angiogram, I think.

Jackie MacDougall: Oh, yeah, like an ultrasound, right.

Kari Kirkland: Yeah. Basically, then you speak with a lot of people. You speak with the nurses, and you speak with the counselors. And after all of that, you have to get, if you haven't had it recently for women, a mammogram, in some cases a colonoscopy. I didn't because I did the test that they needed me to do, and everything came back okay. And because of my age, I was still under 50. They said, we'll wait, simply because they have to put stuff into you that is harmful to your kidney in order to do that.

My doctor basically said, if we get any abnormality back, we'll do it, but if not, let's save the kidney as much as we can so that your recipient gets the healthiest kidney possible.

Which I appreciated, and I'm sure he did too. And then they sit down as a board and discuss your case, and you're not a part of that. That's completely independent of you. And so you never know what's being said. Apparently, they look over all of your labs, all of your tests, all of your psychological analysis, everything from the past few months of testing, and they decide whether or not they're going to allow you to be a donor.

Jackie MacDougall: Wow.

Kari Kirkland: Now, in some cases, it may be you have to lose some weight or you have to gain some weight or there's different things like that happen that would affect their decision. You can appeal it and say, hey, I can do those things and try it again, but I was accepted on the first round, so it was go time.

Jackie MacDougall: And let me ask you this, when they did the psychological testing, were they upfront and what they were looking for, what the red flags might be, or were they just like, we're just going to chat?

Kari Kirkland: A bit of both. They have to kind of ask you very direct questions like, are you being paid for this? Is someone coercing you into this? So in terms of that, yeah, there are pretty blatant, blunt questions that get asked, so you kind of know the direction that they're heading. But a lot of it also is, do you have any history of depression? Do you have any history of self harm? Do you have body issues? Do you have any psychological issues that you've been treated for in the past? So it's very in depth, and at least at my center, they really did put a lot into that to make sure that I was psychologically okay for this.

Jackie MacDougall: Right. And it's so important because while we can sit here and talk about how incredible it is, and I can only imagine how it fills you, knowing that you did such an incredible thing. And I think it's really important to talk about, like, it is a big deal. It's not like you went in and gave a tooth. I don't know. Nobody wants to give a tooth, but it's not like you went in like, oh, no problem, I'm just going to give a kidney. It's a big damn deal. And there are risks of complication. There are, like you were saying, body image things after surgeries. Some people struggle after surgeries. And I think it's really important to kind of figure out where you're at before that. And it's responsible. I mean, just in case you are listening and you don't know, it's illegal to sell a kidney or to get money for your kidney or to even be coerced into donating a kidney. There are a lot of regulations in place for a reason.

One thing you'll hear over and over again from kidney donors and recipients is that the process does not happen overnight. While Kari was waiting for next steps, she also took a giant leap toward a lifelong dream of her own scheduling time to record her second album at the legendary Capitol Records in Los Angeles.

Kari Kirkland: There was no talk yet of surgery date, and so I put into motion basically booking the studio where I was going to be in Capitol in LA. And that was all booked. And shortly after that, we got a surgery date that was actually almost two months before recording, and I had to make a really hard decision to move the surgery by about seven weeks and put it after recording. There was some concern as to whether I would be ready to

do a full album just six weeks after surgery. And there was also in the back of my mind, if I'm being completely dead honest, it's like something could go very wrong. And for me, I am doing something for someone else, but for me, I have to make sure that I put this out into the world before, just in case I want to make sure that there is a legacy here of this work. So we did delay it and I felt horrible because you're putting someone else's life at more risk and also every day is torture for someone on dialysis. That was a very difficult decision, but I made it. I went into the studio. It was Wednesday. It was the Wednesday before surgery, like exactly one week before surgery. And we wrapped on Saturday and I left on Sunday for Seattle and then donated on Wednesday. So, yeah, it was wow, it was a very packed couple of weeks.

Jackie MacDougall: Wow.

Kari Kirkland: It was a very stressful time, but also a very freeing time to be able to be creative and then know you're going to do something that's going to change someone's life forever. That's a cool thing. Here's a really cool thing that you do not have to include, but for me, it's really cool because since I was eight, I had this sort of strange premonition, this weird feeling, very strong, that I was not going to live past my 46th birthday.

Jackie MacDougall: Wow.

Kari Kirkland: Don't know why. There's no reason for it. There's nothing attached to that number. Nobody died around that time. Just very strong feelings since I was very young that I wasn't going to live past 46. My 46th birthday was October 3. I went into the studio October 13 and then I donated on the 21st. And I don't tell very many people that I didn't before because it's not really the most positive thing to think about. But I told my best friend and I told my husband, obviously, and I have another very close friend who I had told about that, and he said after the fact, because of course I made it to 46. And then I did all these things and I lived. And he said to me about a week after surgery, he said, maybe your eight year old self was not wrong, that you turned 46 and you started this brand new life. I love that you went under, you gave a part of yourself and put it in

someone else. Therefore you are not the same person. And maybe you suffered a little death of that old self.

Jackie MacDougall: Yeah.

Kari Kirkland: And now you're not going to live past your 46 because you're starting over. Woo woo. That's freaking out there. But I was like, wow, I had never even considered that, but there it was, these sort of momentous things happening right in a row and immediately after I turned 46, right?

Jackie MacDougall: A rebirth of who you are and what you're capable of. It's incredible. Did you ever, throughout the process, feel like, oh shit, what did I get myself into?

Kari Kirkland: Honestly, only right at the moment before they wheeled me in. That was it. They give you every opportunity and they also make it very well known you can say no right up until the moment you can't say anything. And they even check with you before they put the gas mask on, they even check with you before they put the IV in to say nighty night, because as soon as that starts going into you, which happens about ten minutes before they wheel you in and you start getting loopy, they ask you for consent. Right up until that point, they ask me for consent. And there was a part of me that was like, you can still say no. You can still say no. It's okay, nobody's going to hate you. It's all right, you can still say no. That was there. And then it went, think about Robert, think about Lynn, think about something other than yourself. And there it went.

Jackie MacDougall: And so is he like in another operating room, like, nearby?

Kari Kirkland: To be honest, when you're lying down on the bed and they've given you the happy juice, you don't really even know where you are. And I had never had surgery before, so I had nothing to base this on. I had no clue what it was going to feel like. And so I knew in the back of my mind his surgery was going to start a little bit later than mine because

obviously, like, they have to take something out of me first and but it didn't start much later after than mine did, and I knew when I got out. So my surgery was very longer than they said it usually is. It was over 6 hours.

Jackie MacDougall: Oh, wow.

Kari Kirkland: And they got me into the recovery room and when I kind of came to, I said, Where's Robert? And they said, oh, he's still in surgery. And he was in surgery until almost 930 that night. So it was like almost 11 hours for him.

Jackie MacDougall: Wow.

Kari Kirkland: Yeah. It's intense, man.

Jackie MacDougall: And that's not typical though, right?

Kari Kirkland: No, he had some heart issues as well, so they were working with that. That was why his took a little bit longer. Mine took a little bit longer, I think, to be honest, because I had talked to them in so much depth beforehand to say, hey, I'm a vocalist, this is my life's work, this is what I do for a living. I need to talk to the anesthesiologist about intubation. And we had talked about doing more local anesthesia than general so that I would have to be intubated for the least amount of time possible. And also my surgeon's a curmudgeon. And he pulled this thing before my case went to the board, where he kind of came in all gruffly and he said, I'm going to harm you. And it was like, what now? And he goes, I don't even feel good about doing this because I'm definitely going to hurt you. And it's like, okay, but do you not understand? It's like, don't talk about the other person. My commitment is to you. He was so hardcore and I was like, for me, dude, you need to take a little step back. Like, you can chill out a little bit right now. And he didn't really like that, but I was so kind of nonchalant about it. And then the nurse came in and I was like, dude, that guy, is he just having a bad day or what is going on? She asked me, what's the problem? And I said, he just came in here all balls out, like,

I'm going to hurt you and this isn't good, and why would you do this? And she kind of smiles and I was like, oh God. It's like good cop, bad cop. He's like, coming in hardcore to make sure that I'm serious about this. And that made me wonder how many people at that point go, okay, actually, no, I'm out.

Jackie MacDougall: Oh, my God.

Kari Kirkland: He kind of knew that I had figured it out and it was good. But anyway, my point in all this is his bedside manner is terrible. He was a gruff human being, but he was so particular about making sure everything was perfect. Everything from the length of the incision. He showed me his hands because he's like, do you see this part of my hand? This is how wide it's going to be because this is the part that has to go. And I'm like, this is like when a pilot comes on and tells you, we're at 17,000 ft climbing to 22,000 and we're going to be turning left at the Rocky mountains. It's like, just fly the plane, okay? I don't need to know. I just need to get to Miami. That's all I need. You do not have to give me and I was the same with him. I don't need the details, right? Maybe some people do. Just do the thing, do your job. And I looked up at him just before they put the gas mask on and I said, you bring me back. And he was almost shocked. He was like, of course, that's my first priority. But I was kind happy that I sort of caught him off guard and was like, yeah, you do that.

Jackie MacDougall: He's like, I'm invested in this one.

Kari Kirkland: She's got my number, so yeah, it definitely took longer than most of them do, but they said there was no blood loss. It was great. Wow, very smooth. Yeah, awesome.

Jackie MacDougall: And when did you see Robert for the first time?

Kari Kirkland: It wasn't until the next day. It's a little hazy because the anesthesia did a number on me and I found out I was allergic to oxycodone, which I had no idea. And my heart rate tanked, and they put

me on a heart rate monitor. And lots of bad sort of bad things happened in a very short period of time, so everything's a little fuzzy, but it was definitely the next day. You're encouraged to walk as soon as possible. Like even the first night, they want you to walk. And I could walk past his door, I could see him. He had a hard time. It was a very difficult surgery for him, so it was difficult to see that because I read stories before Donating saying, like, as soon as the recipient gets the organ, it's like they perk right up and everything starts going well for them. And I was like, that's not happening. My kidney made almost two liters of urine, so it was doing its job. It was doing an excellent job, but he was having trouble. So I did pop in to see him and I knew something was not 100%. He came through it stronger than ever. And the good news is he's doing great now. It was just a rough couple of days in the hospital.

Jackie MacDougall: Yeah, I bet. And I can only imagine the emotions that you were feeling throughout all of that. And how were you feeling in those first days after?

Kari Kirkland: It's hard to have anything to compare it to. There was no benchmark for that. Physically, it's more discomfort than pain for me. You had your abs cut open. It's like having a C section. It's a little more than that because your abs are pulled apart for a longer time. It's not just taking a baby out. But I was hazy from the anesthesia. I was not with it because of the allergic reaction, but overall, I had this very calm sense about everything, and that may have been anesthesia related as well, the euphoria that comes with it. But I just had this feeling of like, yeah, he did the right thing. This is the loving thing, this is the right thing, and this discomfort is temporary. You're going to get through this. There was something inside me that knew, like, you're going to be fine and he's going to be OK. Like, everything was just it was very calm and I've retained that. I am super type A have been my whole life, fight or flight girl my entire life. And since the surgery, there is this otherworldly sense of like, don't worry, it's all okay. Everything's okay, and it's constant. It's the weirdest thing. It's changed me. Maybe not 180 degrees, but a solid 100.

Jackie MacDougall: Wow. And are all those changes positive?

Kari Kirkland: Oh, definitely. Yeah. I went through in mid December to mid January or early January, a period of pretty extreme depression. Not when I say extreme. I mean for me, definitely felt purposeless. It's kind of like this big build up, and then you do the thing. It's like anything like that, whether it's running a big race or whether it's getting married or whatever, you go through the thing and then it's like, oh, what now? For me, it was also kind of a sense of, I've given what I can give. I don't know what else I have to give. I felt not hopeless. It's not hopelessness, just kind of an aimlessness. And I didn't understand that. And I feel like it's important to talk about that because since talking about it, I've discovered through some online groups and some community that it's very normal. The timing is very normal. Everything about it is very normal. And that is another reason why you go through this psych testing, because they want to know that you have a support system in place, whether that's family, friends, therapist, community, whatever. It is that, to me, if I can impress something upon people who are going to be donors or who are thinking about being donors, is to make sure that you've got someone there or someone's who you can talk to about feeling down.

Jackie MacDougall: Yeah, because it's not like everybody's out there donating kidneys that are like, oh, yeah, I went through that. You know what I mean? If a woman goes through a divorce, throw a pebble and you'll hit five people who've gone through a divorce, there's power in finding other people who've been through it 100%. And so donating a kidney is not an everyday occurrence for the general population. So I can imagine that might be a lonely place that you feel like no one gets it.

Kari Kirkland: Yeah, it definitely was. And then I also worried if I told people that, they would say, like, oh, see, it wasn't all champagne and puppies. There is a downside because I went in very positive and I came out very positive, and that, of course, was my stuff. That wasn't the reality of anyone's reaction. That was me putting that on me. But those things are real. That's like a real thing that people go through. And it was finding other people and finding these online groups that I could feel good about even if I wasn't posting or even if I wasn't asking questions. There was such a rich history and a context for me to go back through other posts and say, like, oh, yeah, that's exactly what I felt, or was there, oh, that's a little

bit different, but it's the same theme. You're right. There's just so much comfort in finding out that you're not alone. I mean, that's what a lesson for everything. But, yeah, it really helped. And that's another reason why doing this climb that I'm doing, meeting these people that I'm going to be meeting, is so important, because there's one thing to be online and be even in a Zoom or whatever, but it's another thing to have that face to face and heart to heart contact with, not. Just one, but this group of people who did the thing.

Jackie MacDougall: So let's talk about the climb. How does a person go from having donated life to another human being to climbing the largest mountain above sea level in the world?

Kari Kirkland: I saw a video on Facebook.

Jackie MacDougall: My gosh, Facebook is, man, this changing your life.

Kari Kirkland: Love it or hate it, but this has brought a lot of great things into my life. And I saw this video of these people climbing Mount Kilimanjaro last year, like 2022, and I found out it was a group of kidney donors, and they were raising awareness about living donation by climbing, basically to say, look what you can do after you've donated, you can still do amazing things. A lot of people think, like, you give up your life for someone else. That's not it at all. It's a temporary thing. And so I reached out to one of the organizers of that climb, and I said, this is something that I would definitely be interested in. And he said, awesome, I'll keep you posted. I'm going to try to get a group together to do it in 2023. And I was like, great, okay, well, this guy, Bobby McLaughlin, he's a kidney donor as well. And he organized a group. And at first it was a small group. And so we all kind of got on the zoom call and talked through the logistics of it and tried to figure stuff out. And then a couple of us just said, hey, why don't we start a nonprofit? Because at least then we have sort of the structure, the framework in place to accept donations, to help with media outreach, and we're going to try and do a documentary. Like, why don't we try and make this a legit thing? So ten of us formed a board, and

we started a nonprofit, and I designed a website, and everybody kind of used their talents to get this up and running. And then all of a sudden, we had 24 climbers who were like, into this and let's do this. And then we had some recipients who said, hey, I'm not a donor, obviously, but can I be a part of this? And we said, absolutely. And then we had some liver donors who were like, hey, it's not just kidneys, right? Like, we can come too. Yeah, come too. And then we had a kidney transplant surgeon from UCLA, and a few of the nurses on his team say, actually, we'd like to join you as well.

Jackie MacDougall: Wow.

Kari Kirkland: So now we have a group that's just about around 34 of recipients, donors, and surgeons and nurses and advocates who want to support the raising of awareness of what is possible around living donation in general, right. Whether you're a donor or a recipient. So we are climbing. We're going to attempt to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. I say that only because I'm trying to be pragmatic.

Jackie MacDougall: I literally had to look it up it's like the highest single freestanding mountain above sea level in the world.

Kari Kirkland: 19,340Ft, I think. Yeah.

Jackie MacDougall: 341. Don't discount that one foot.

Kari Kirkland: That'll be the one I I lose. I know. I got it.

Jackie MacDougall: Oh, my gosh. So where do you start?

Kari Kirkland: Looking at the map, the elevation, I think, is already around 3000 something, maybe. We drive to basically where the base of the trailhead is. Right. We're all flying in. We all kind of meet for the two days before the climb, and we all get to meet in person for the first time

and hang out and get all of our gear checked by the guides. And then we start the climb on March 3. And our goal is to summit on March 9, which is World Kidney Day.

Jackie MacDougall: Yeah. That's amazing. And how cold will it be? Because you're out there for a long time.

Kari Kirkland: It's going to be bad. It's going to be really bad. And I'm perpetually cold. I live in the desert and I'm still cold. Like, my husband always jokes, he's like, if it drops below 85, she's got a sweater on. Like, oh, my gosh. I mean, you can see it's like 68. And I'm always cold. So they expect obviously, like, well below freezing, well below.

Jackie MacDougall: And so obviously you have these guides with you. And is there shelter throughout the climb?

Kari Kirkland: So the guides and the porters well, the porters go ahead and they set up our camp for us so that by the time we get there, all we have to do is eat and go to sleep. They're providing the all season tents and we have to bring everything else. But, I mean, the porters do a lot of the heavy lifting. We get the luxury of just carrying a day pack for the actual hiking part, but yeah, it's a big deal.

Jackie MacDougall: How many hours a day will you be climbing?

Kari Kirkland: It just depends on the day. So we average anywhere from four to 9 miles a day. It's about 45 miles in total. So, yeah, we just have to make sure we cover enough each day that we can also acclimate to the altitude. One of the days we actually go up, I think, to the high 13,000, and then we go down to camp so that we're just kind of getting the body ready for that altitude. Because altitude sickness is a real thing and it's just once you get up over 15, 16,000ft, a lot of things can change very quickly. There are a lot of unknowns on this trip.

Jackie MacDougall: Yeah, for sure. And then how have you been training? Is there some sort of training program for this that you've all been doing?

Kari Kirkland: Because everybody lives in different places, it's hard to stick to one thing. Everybody kind of does what works for them. Some people live where there's a lot of snow and they get the luxury of getting out there and hiking in the snow to see what that's going to feel like? Others of us who live in warmer climates, there are some local hills. I know there's another gentleman on the climb who lives just down the street from me, and I would have never even known him. He's a recipient who's going he and I are going to get together tomorrow and do one last climb up to what's called the cross. So for me, I got Covid in December and I was out for five weeks. My training took a big hit, but I think generally, if you come, what I've read is that you need to come in pretty peak physical condition. You need to be very ready for a lot of lower body work. And I've always had a strong lower body. I've been a triathlete and doing trapeze as well. I don't feel like I'm going to be a disaster, but I feel like there's more training I could have done. I just ran out of time.

Jackie MacDougall: Right.

Kari Kirkland: So there's one lady who just hiked up Mailbox (Peak) in Washington and it's like, you're so ready. You are so ready. Right? It's just me putting 1ft in front of the other.

Jackie MacDougall: Absolutely. So what does this mean to you?

Kari Kirkland: Doing this huge thing, the hike to me, it's about building this community of people who are educated about living donation. Like you mentioned at the top of our discussion, I had no idea. In the back of my mind, you hear somebody donated a kidney or somebody donated their liver, and you think, well, that's insane. Right. And then when it comes to your time to be called to the table, it's not insane at all. It makes perfect

sense. And had I known earlier, I can't say whether I would have been called to altruistic donation. In a way, I'm glad I wasn't, because then I wouldn't have been able to donate to my friend. But I also think that's not a reason to stop anybody from donating altruistically.

Jackie MacDougall: And that just means that there's no intended recipient on the other side.

Kari Kirkland: Correct. Yeah. It just means you don't know who it is.

Jackie MacDougall: Right.

Kari Kirkland: But I also think that people don't necessarily understand that it's something that is very doable. They think of it as something that only a subset of the population could even do. And that's just not true. And there are over 100,000 people on the waitlist. When you think about that number, that seems huge. But when you also think like, oh, okay, how many people fit in a football stadium? And if all of them were at least willing to get tested, there's just to me, like, a gap in the education. We don't understand as everyday laypeople that this is something that so many people can do. They just have to want to do it. Because I'm living a completely normal life and the majority of my labs are as good as they were before I donated. Some of them are better because it made me focus on my health. Not to say I was living recklessly before, but I didn't think about shoving back half a pizza. I didn't think about the amount of sodium in the food we eat as a nation. I didn't think about being good to my body on a daily basis because you only get one shot now. I think about, hey, how can I best eat to support where I'm at today? How can I best hydrate? And what can I do to exercise? It shifts the focus on to health in a very positive way. For me, it's been a wake up call. Not that there was anything really wrong with me, but a wake up call in terms of what I actually put in my body and that I'm aware. And I really haven't given anything up. I still have a glass of wine with dinner. I still eat meat. I've altered things. I've moderated things. But for the most part, if I didn't know, I wouldn't know

Jackie MacDougall: It's amazing. I remember when I had my gallbladder out, you know, I was like, oh, you can't eat this and this and this and, like, it's a totally different thing. I'm in one of the same groups with you, and I see people like, oh, what should I expect diet wise? And people are like nothing.

Kari Kirkland: You're good. The funny ones to me are like, when can I have a beer? And some guy came back and said, I had a beer at the hospital. As soon as I left the hospital, I was like, you say it's not one of those things that is hugely altering, changing. Everything is different. It really isn't right.

Jackie MacDougall: Thank you for sharing your experience. Just sharing your experience and what you've gone through is so educational for someone else. You don't know until you know. And so anybody who's listening, I'm just grateful that they've listened this far. Because you don't have to go out and donate a kidney, but if you could carry the knowledge and the education and the understanding with you throughout the world so that when it does come up, you know a little bit more and you can share. I heard this story, I heard Kari, who explained this, this and this. I think that will only help the cause.

Kari Kirkland: Exactly. You're exactly right. It has to be right for you. And you have to know and you have to listen, and you have to be truly ready. And if you're not, that's okay. Yes, that's okay.

Jackie MacDougall: It doesn't say anything about you if you don't want to donate a kidney.

Kari Kirkland: Not at all. And you know another really important thing? Just checking that box on your driver's license if it's something you're comfortable with, how many lives you can save, even if you're a deceased donor. That said, a living donation has a much better chance at being a lifelong organ. But, man, for somebody who is in need, a deceased donor is a life saver just as much as a living donor. It really is. And just sharing the word of like it's something you can do. This is not a hero's game. This

is not out of the realm of possibility. You do not have to be a triathlete to do this. You just don't. You can do it.

Jackie MacDougall: Absolutely. You don't have to.

Kari Kirkland: That's right. But you can just for people to know that it's a possibility if they feel that pull, that they can get tested and that they can reach out to community and say, I did that for this. Because one of the things we're sort of tasked to do with the documentary that we're trying to produce is to bring someone else with us up the mountain who is in need. So we're all kind of looking for people who need a donor and we're going to try and tell their stories as well.

Jackie MacDougall: Wow.

Kari Kirkland: Even if you don't want to be a donor, whatever, I would bet you there's someone in your community, in your circle, if you spread wide enough, who is in need. And the power of social media and the power of just word of mouth, talking to people, it's huge. We're all going to share these stories of other people who hopefully then someone sees that and even if they don't want to get tested, they can share that story.

Jackie MacDougall: That's exactly right. And how can we support the climb, the organization, the documentary? Put us to work, Kari, tell us what to do.

Kari Kirkland: Thank you. No, I really appreciate that because this is a hard time for a lot of people and it is hard to ask for help and especially financial help. But we have a website called Living Donor Adventures. There's a link on our website to donate, but there's also right now a Go Fund Me that's sort of circulating for people to donate to help this particular climb. And that's essentially to help with the costs of the documentary that we're producing as well as some of the high visibility gear that we're taking up the mountain so that we have a branded look when we take that photo at the top on World Kidney Day. We're also

supported by Donate Life and UNOS and get some of those names out there as well. So it just spreads the word about where people can go to find help on that website as well. There are also links to how you can find your local donation center, how you can find out if you're eligible to become a donor, lots of different resources on that site, livingdonoradventures.com

Jackie MacDougall: Will there be any sort of livestream there on World Kidney Day? Because I'm already getting emotional. I can't even imagine watching this.

Kari Kirkland: We're going to try, we're going to try everywhere that we have service, that we find that we can get service. We're going to try and do like a live Facebook thing, a live Instagram thing on the Living Donor Adventures site, so we're going to try fantastic.

Jackie MacDougall: To support Kari and the entire organization, visit livingdonoradventures.com I'll also link to all of the things that Kari mentioned in this episode, including resources on grownasswoman.guide. To keep the conversation going, join our Grown-Ass Woman's Guide Facebook community and follow [@Grownasswoman.Guide](https://www.facebook.com/Grownasswoman.Guide) on all the social channels. And for a transcript of this episode, visit grownasswoman.guide. Thank you so much for listening, and if you feel inspired, please leave a rating and review on your favorite podcast app. I appreciate your support so much, and until next time you are a grown ass woman, act accordingly.