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Kidney Transplant Crosses Foreign Borders

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After nearly four years of waiting, a suburban man gets a new kidney in a true family affair. But it's an operation that almost did not happen until a Chicago congresswoman helped the family cut through some serious governmental red tape.

There is still a chance of kidney rejection, but his doctors say Erich Monzon is doing very well. He is now recovering at home along with his cousin -- a man he had never met before, who now it appears has saved Erich's life.

For four years Erich Monzon's prison was his bedroom. Suffering from lupus, he spent 14 hours a day hooked up to a kidney dialysis machine waiting for a donor.

Then last November he got a glimpse of hope. After 200 potential donors were tested, one was found half-way around the world in the Philippines. Erich's cousin Ben Liggayu was a match and willing to donate a kidney.

But the state department denied a visa to the Philippine farmer, fearing he might never return to his home country. That's when Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky got involved and began wading through three months of red tape.

"There were many hurdles and in the meantime Erich continued to put his life on hold," Schakowsky said.

It was Schakowsky's personal guarantee that Ben would return home after the surgery that finally got the U.S. embassy in Manila to grant him a temporary visa. And nearly one month ago Ben and Erich were wheeled into operating rooms.

Ben, a father of four left his family for months and risked his life to help a cousin he had never met. His English may be poor, but clearly expresses his sole motivation.

"I want to help my cousin," he said.

He's more than helped. Ben's literally given Erich the gift of life, the former strangers now more than cousins. They say they will be life-long friends.

"I'm just thankful. He made a major sacrifice and I can never repay him for what he's done," Erich said.

Now 24-year-old Erich is looking forward to a life without machines. He wants to go back to law school, to travel, and do all the normal things he's been missing for years.

Meanwhile Congresswoman Schakowsky says she plans to look into making it easier to get temporary visas for other families in similar situations.