

Mission of Mercy

Seeking a kidney for their child, parents travel 9,500 miles



Daaniya Zaidi

JOHN ABBOTT

Daaniya Zaidi is an energetic three-year-old with dark hair, deep brown eyes, and a sunny disposition. Colorfully clad in tie-dye and polka dots, she careens around her family's Upper East Side living room with her toddler brother one afternoon in late October. "I like to do dress up," the little girl announces, describing her preferences for fairies and princesses and her plan to wear a ladybug costume for Halloween. "I like to go to the playground."

But not long ago, Daaniya didn't have as much time or energy for play. Despite her young age, she can speak in detail about life before her June kidney transplant. "I had to go to dialysis all day, and I had to stay there," she says. "Now," she adds to the exhausted amusement of her mother, Samareen Shami, "I can run all over the house."

A year ago, Shami and her husband, Salman Zaidi, could scarcely have hoped to see their daughter so healthy. Around age two, Daaniya was diagnosed with a congenital condition that leads to kidney

tumors and renal failure. "In six months, her kidneys went from 100 percent function to 25 percent," says Shami, who stopped working as a consultant in the oil and gas industry when her daughter was diagnosed. Daaniya, who went on dialysis, needed a transplant as soon as possible—but family members weren't viable matches and a Facebook campaign proved fruitless. And there was another hurdle: the family was living in Singapore, where Zaidi worked as a banker. "We were in a country where the waiting list for a kidney is nine years," Shami says. "Donation—especially live donation—is not something that happens there very often. So we had to make a choice."

The couple opted to move halfway around the globe—to an apartment just blocks from NYP/Weill Cornell—so their daughter could have the best chance for a transplant. After Zaidi's bank transferred him to New York, the family relocated in February. "It's extremely unusual," says Sandip Kapur, MD '90, chief of transplant surgery and director of the Kidney and Pancreas Transplant Programs, whom the couple chose to do the operation after an international search. "I've been doing this for eighteen years, and it's the only time I've seen a family pick up and move here for their child." Father and daughter became part of a transplant chain—a system that allows someone to give a kidney to a stranger while his or her relative gets an organ from a donor in the same situation. "They don't donate directly to their loved one," Kapur says, "but they allow their loved one to get a nicely matched, well-functioning, live-donor kidney."

Since Daaniya's condition can cause malignant tumors, surgeons removed her kidneys while she awaited a transplant; meanwhile, her father underwent donor testing. In June, they became part of a chain of nine recipients and ten donors, with the extra donor forming the first link in a future chain. Daaniya received an organ from a thirty-three-year-old woman in California—it was shipped via red-eye—and her father gave a long-awaited kidney to a forty-eight-year-old New Yorker who'd been difficult to match. "It's not quite the same as donating to your child," says Zaidi, who has suffered no ill effects, "but it's a very close second."

Daaniya has been doing extremely well since the transplant—growing, gaining weight, and bursting with energy. "It was very successful," says Valerie Johnson, PhD '76, MD '77, associate professor of clinical pediatrics, director of the Division of Pediatric Nephrology, and a member of the patient care team of the Phyllis and David Komansky Center for Children's Health at NYP. "You'd hardly know this is the same child."

Although Daaniya will need anti-rejection drugs and regular checkups throughout her life—and will likely require another transplant in her late twenties—she's essentially a normal, healthy preschooler. After the long months of dialysis, dietary restrictions, and bans on activities like bathing, swimming, and rough play (due to her catheter), the girl can snack and romp with her peers. "Seeing her healthy, happy, growing—just being a child—is fantastic," Zaidi says. "You forget some days that she went through an enormous amount to get where she is. Sometimes, you're in the happy position of taking it for granted."

— Beth Saulnier