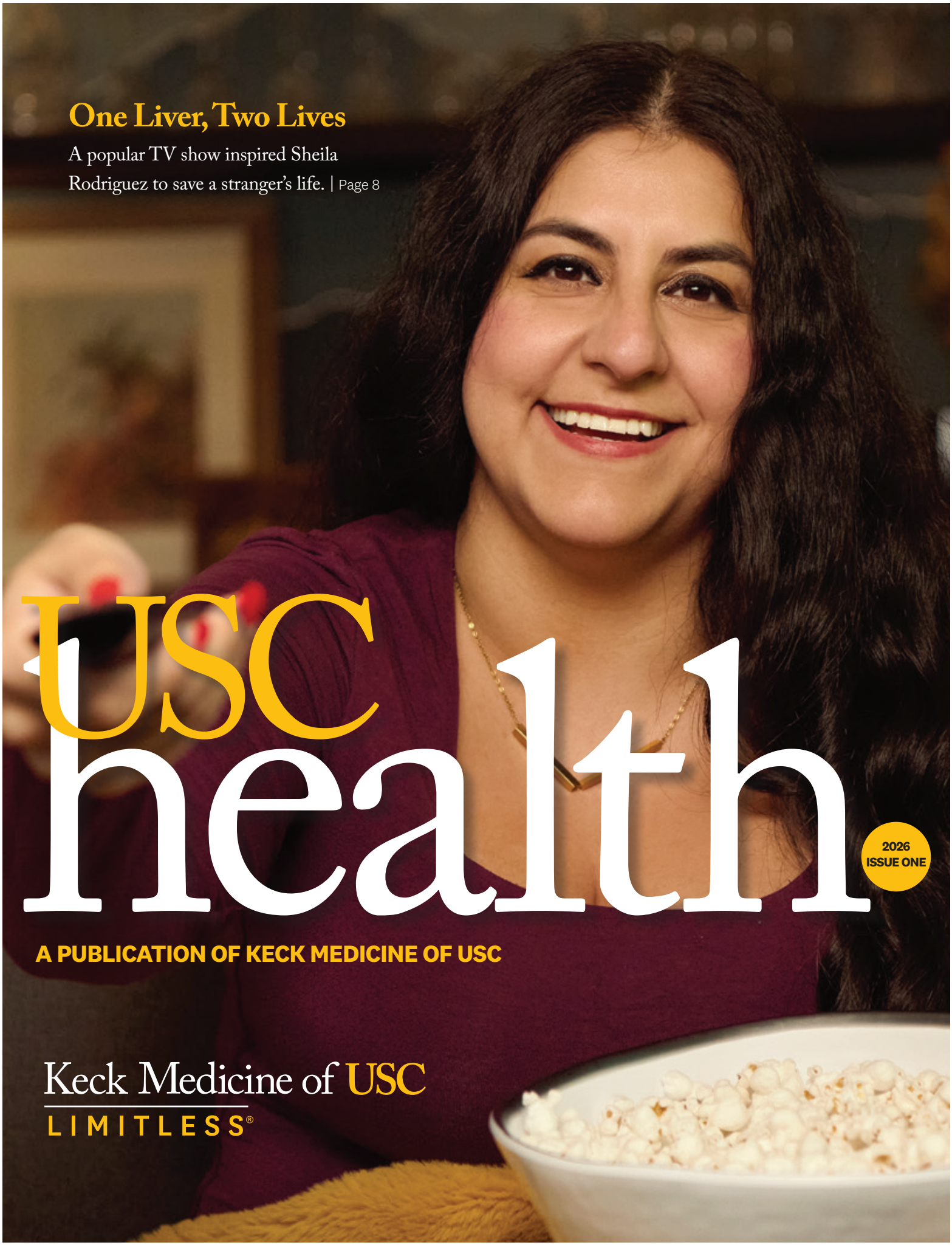


One Liver, Two Lives

A popular TV show inspired Sheila Rodriguez to save a stranger's life. | Page 8

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One Liver, Two Lives

A storyline on a popular TV show led Sheila Rodriguez to the USC Living-Donor Liver Program and changed both her life and the life of her liver recipient.

BY NOVID PARSI



Kremer Johnson Photography

Examinations

Learn more about the USC Living-Donor Liver Program. Call (800) USC-CARE or scan the QR code.

On Christmas Day in 2023, Sheila "Shey" Rodriguez was watching a "Grey's Anatomy" episode that took her by surprise. In the episode, character Meredith Grey donates part of her liver to her father. "I'm watching this and I'm thinking, is this a real thing? Can people actually donate a portion of their liver?" says Sheila, 35.

To find the answer, Sheila, who works as a public safety dispatcher for the city of Placentia, opened her laptop and quickly discovered the USC Living-Donor Liver Program, part of the USC Transplant Institute, which is part of Keck Medicine of USC.

As she read the site, Sheila realized that the fictional character's experience is, in fact, a real thing: Liver donations can come not only from deceased donors but also from living donors.

Reading the site further, Sheila learned that over 12,000 Americans are on the waitlist for a liver transplant, and thousands of people die waiting for a liver donation each year.

'A unique group of people'

While many U.S. transplant programs offer living-kidney donations, only a small number of programs, including the one at Keck Medicine, can perform living-liver donations.

Living donors are rare, but rarer still are donors like Sheila who are willing to donate their organs to a stranger (nondirected donors). Of 485 living-liver transplants performed in 2020, only 12% were nondirected, according to the Scientific Registry of Transplant Recipients.

"They're a unique group of people who come forward out of the goodness of their hearts," says Hyosun Han, MD, a hepatologist and medical director of the USC Living-Donor Liver Program.

A public safety dispatcher who at times gives CPR instructions to 911 callers over the phone, Sheila knew the value of providing strangers with lifesaving help.

"As a first responder, Sheila has the experience and mindset of helping others," says Navpreet Kaur, MD, a liver transplant surgeon and surgical director of the USC Living-Donor Liver Program.

"I thought about the people on the waitlist," says Sheila, who lives in Ontario, California. "I thought, if that were my family member and I couldn't donate my liver to them, I'd want someone to help."

> "I'm watching this and I'm thinking, is this a real thing? Can people actually donate a portion of their liver?"
>
> Sheila Rodriguez

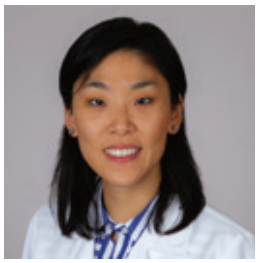
The gift of life

On that Christmas Day, Sheila decided to offer the gift of life.

After she completed an online questionnaire, an independent living-donor advocate from Keck Medicine called Sheila to learn more about her interest and motivation. Once Sheila confirmed her wish to move forward, she had various blood tests as well as CT and MRI imaging.



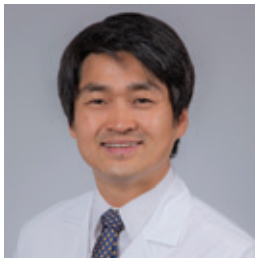
Sheila Rodriguez in Covina.



Hyosun (Helen) Han, MD
Rated 4.8 out of 5 stars
4.8 ★★★★½



Navpreet Kaur, MD
Rated 5 out of 5 stars
5.0 ★★★★★



Brian Kim, MD
Rated 4.8 out of 5 stars
4.8 ★★★★½

Reviews from Keck Medicine patients, as of March 1, 2026

She met with several Keck Medicine team members — including a social worker, psychiatrist, dietitian and surgeon — who evaluated Sheila's physical and mental health. The team also determined that Sheila would have financial and social support for the two to four weeks of typical recovery time.

As with any donor, the USC Transplant Institute team, including her hepatologist Brian Kim, MD, informed Sheila about the procedure and its potential risks. "A lot of people on our team weigh in to make sure a nondirected donor is a good candidate and has a full understanding of what they're doing," Dr. Kaur says.

After Sheila underwent two days of evaluations, the living-donor liver committee discussed Sheila's case and determined she would make an excellent fit as a living-liver donor. They then moved forward with matching her to a recipient.

Compassionate care

On June 27, 2024, the transplantation procedure at Keck Hospital of USC went successfully for both Sheila and her recipient.

After the surgery, Sheila recalls being wheeled into the recovery room and, to her delight, receiving a handwritten note from her anonymous recipient. "The card said, 'I'm thankful for your gift, and I'm going to take care of it,'" she says.

Sheila, who had never been hospitalized before, says she greatly appreciated the Keck Medicine team's care and attention. "My experience at Keck Medicine was wonderful," she says. "My team really took care of me."

"We have a very compassionate group of health care providers who care about our patients and are very proud of our outcomes for donors and recipients," Dr. Han says. "We rely on donors like Sheila who are making a major sacrifice, so we see it as our commitment to make the process as safe and enjoyable as possible for them."

While Sheila felt pain and discomfort for about three weeks, "everything's been perfect since then," she says.

Spreading hope

This past New Year's Day, Sheila walked in the Rose Parade as part of OneLegacy Ambassadors, a group of volunteer advocates for organ, eye and tissue donation. As she spoke with other donors and recipients, Sheila was especially moved by the families who chose to donate their late children's organs.

"Even in the midst of such heartbreak, these families chose to give hope to other families," she says.

Now, as a OneLegacy Ambassador, Sheila continues to spread hope — and information. It still gives her pause when she encounters people who don't realize that the liver is the only internal organ that can regenerate and achieve 100% of its function after donation.

For anyone interested in becoming a living-liver donor, Sheila offers these simple but profound words: "You can save someone's life."



"I thought, if that were my family member and I couldn't donate my liver to them, I'd want someone to help."

Sheila Rodriguez

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