



Transcript

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Best of Friends

Producer: **Helen Grasswill**

Researcher: **Mara Blazic**

Hello, I'm Caroline Jones. Earlier this year, an *Australian Story* program about a kidney transplant made headline news all round Australia. The recipient was Australia's richest man, Kerry Packer, and the donor, Mr Packer's helicopter pilot and friend, Nick Ross. Tonight's *Australian Story* is about Nick Ross's remarkable gift. Neither of them has spoken elsewhere about this remarkable gift. So tonight, our last program for the year, we're bringing you their story again. We look forward to your company when we return in the new year. But now, here's Nick Ross and Kerry Packer.

NICK ROSS: Kerry and I - our relationship as friends seems to be beyond the comprehension of a lot of people. They can't understand why me, as his pilot, is actually his mate too. I think it's just something that's grown over the years, because we have a lot of common interests. We race each other in fast cars and go-karts. We enjoy going out and falling around and flying and a lot of boy things that we do together. We're both a pair of rascals, really, probably for different reasons. But we're rascally people. I've always been able to go over to his house, wander in there, sit down, put my feet on the table if I so desire. And, you know, we talk and...I feel more like a member of the family, really, than an employee.



Kerry comes across to the general public, I think, as a man who is larger than life. To some people he's an ogre. The truth is that he's a very kind and generous person who has got where he is by being tough. But he's got a heart of gold. He's a seriously misunderstood person from that point of view. He's a fine man, in my opinion, and I hope that doesn't sound too grand. It's just that he is a fine man. And I consider myself very privileged, not only to know him, but to actually be a friend. And I mean that sincerely.

I gave Kerry the kidney for a number of reasons. He's had a rough bloody track medically all his life. Hasn't had a great deal of quality living in the last several years. I wanted to help him and I could help him, so I did.



KERRY PACKER: Imagine having a friend who's good enough to do that. And the more you see of this, and the more you see of dialysis and the more you see of bypasses and transplants and everything else, then you realise that there's such an enormous difference between dialysis and having a chance of a kidney which works for you. And for someone to be generous enough to say, "Take it out of my body and have a go at it," is the

most precious gift anyone can give you. And the reason I've...I want to publicly thank Nick for what he's done, because there are so few people in the world who'd do it.

NICK ROSS: I'm the sort of person who likes to live life to the full. I never really think too much about aging until I get going to the gym and try and work out pretty much the same as I used to when I was younger. But age isn't a way of life, I think. I'm 59 going on 21, and dangerous.

Outside of flying, my main interest at the moment is my boat - my lovely, lovely 'Bewinched'. It's been a dream of mine for many, many years - probably 30 or 40 years - to be in the situation where I can look forward to retirement and have a beautiful boat and just take off and wander round the world, all the nice, warm bits. It's not going anywhere cold, that's for sure.

I was actually born in Britain in 1941, right in the middle of the war, and I had a reasonably happy childhood. Didn't like school much, so I sort of ran away to the navy when I was 15. I did an apprenticeship as an ordinance artificer, which is an engineer. After 10 years doing that I took up flying. I have no idea why I wanted to become a helicopter pilot. I'd never been in a helicopter. Never even been close to one. They fascinated me, and I guess this was the reason. I was very fortunate enough to be accepted in the navy as a pilot training, and it was as if I then found my niche in life and I never looked back. After the navy I worked as a commercial pilot. I've done some difficult work over the years building powerlines in Iran and Hong Kong using helicopters, and I was in Iran before, during and after the revolution. And I evacuated a lot of families from around various parts during the revolution, which was interesting. Particularly when we couldn't shoot back.

I came to Sydney in the early '80s. I think I'm more Australian than most Australians. I love it. I first met Kerry when I was working for the news at Channel 9. I was sent to pick him up at Palm Beach. Met the great man, and I thought he was...I'd heard he was a bit of a character and I very quickly found out why. He demanded to sit up front and wanted to know who the hell I was, and it was...So, yeah, my impression of him was a very large - how should I say - boisterous person, at our first meeting.

File Footage - 1991

Kerry Packer: You're sitting here under Parliamentary privilege dragging that up again, having been exonerated by the Parliament of this country.

Woman: No-one's...

Kerry Packer: I think you've got a damned hide.

Woman: I'm sorry, Mr Packer.

NICK ROSS: He's a man of, really, of many moods. He can be quite explosive on occasions, as a number of people will testify, famous or otherwise!

File Footage - 1990

Kerry Packer: I'll tell you how I'm feeling. Leave me alone, get out of my way.

NICK ROSS: I'm not immune to this either. I've been on the receiving end of a few of his little comments over the years. The amazing thing with him is he doesn't appear to hold a grudge. Even when he's at his explosive best you know that in half an hour, if you just go and hide, he'll be fine again.

In the late '80s, when Alan Bond bought the Channel 9 network, I said to Kerry then, "You've obviously lost your helicopter now, and you've lost your pilot. I think you should take me with you." I've been working for him ever since, basically carrying him and whoever he desires, wherever he desires.

Kerry...he does have a nickname for me, and it's NOT Biggles, which is a thing which was brought up in all the media. If anything, he calls me Captain Whirlybits. I refer to him quite often as Father, or - in the sort of naval sense, more than anything else, you always referred to the skipper as Father - or 'the old man'.

I suppose I've been a little bit of a rascal most of my life. Not a bad rascal - just a rascal. Probably my biggest failing is the fact I like girls too much. As such, I should probably have never have been married. But I have been married three times and had three divorces.

My biggest regrets in life was the fact that my three marriages – although they produced four children - I wasn't a very good father. I'm not very proud of that fact. I had just started to get a little bit more of a relationship with my children when I tragically lost first my son, who'd just joined the British Army and was killed in an accident and then, 12 months later, I lost my second eldest daughter in a motorcycle accident.

It's a long time ago now and there's no real pain there. But looking back, it's probably had a deep effect on me and makes me realise that life is very precious.

KARIN LEE: I did a Bachelor of Business degree. I majored in marketing. Nick and I met because of my job at Consolidated Press. I'm currently working on the executive level in an area that manages things such as the helicopter operation. Nick's a very easy person to like. You'll be hard-pressed trying to find a lot of people that don't like him. He's just got an infectious personality. He's got a fantastic sense of humour. And I think one of his best qualities is he has this ability to make women feel special. For instance, he came into the office the other day, completely out of the blue, with bunches of roses for about four or five of the girls in the office, and that just made their day. So that's the kind of thing he does. He's just a lovely, generous, funny, warm-hearted person.



NICK ROSS: My life is really lived out of a suitcase. It seems like the whole of my life has been like that. I spend about six months of the year working basically between Sydney and Elliston Station - Kerry's property in the Hunter Valley - and then four or five months of the year overseas living in various hotels.

Karin and I have been together for about two and a half years now. I actually had asked her to come up to the farm with me, when we first met, as a chaperone for three young girls who were coming up for the weekend just to go and visit. And she was gonna be the chaperone. And unfortunately for her, she ended up with me!

JOHN MCNEILL: I'd have to say I'm not at all surprised that Nick did what he did. Kerry and Nick have got a really interesting relationship. There's something there - the way they feel about one another - that they'd never, ever let one another know, either of them, particularly KP. And I don't know whether it's from Nick's military background, but the boss is a man to be - for want of a better word - cherished also. But he's held in that sort of esteem.

KERRY PACKER: I don't talk about personal relationships. Of course I've got a great friendship with him. I've known him a long time. We get on very well together, we have fun together. And, you know, this is the act of someone who's extraordinarily generous. This is not just an act of friendship. This is an act of somebody who's got a big heart. More than friendship. He could have done this for somebody else, too. He's capable of that. What he's got is, he's got enough... um, sort of, belief in himself and confidence and everything else that he wants to do something which is gonna help somebody else. And, you know, that's so special. And I'm forever, I'll be forever grateful. I mean, obviously, he saved my life. I couldn't live on dialysis. I wouldn't.

NICK ROSS: We were in England two and a half years ago, and Kerry became very ill. I found out that it was a kidney-related problem. He's only got one kidney

anyway, the other one being removed some time previously due to cancer, I believe. I was told at the time that there's every chance that he would have to have a kidney transplant. I didn't know anything about the mechanics of it all, but I just put my hand up straight away and said, "Well, if I can help, you know, count me in."

KERRY PACKER: Well, I laughed a bit to start with, because, you know, I didn't believe anyone was going to be that...that generous, and I think, I think in a funny sort of a way, I don't think Nick really appreciated what he was saying either. But then, you know, the idea caught on with him and he became firm and resolute about it, and from my point of view, of course, it was just, it was just a blessing.

NICK ROSS: I don't think Kerry was aware of who had offered to be a donor until probably two or three months after the initial scare, and then he was told it was going to be me, which was just prior to us going to New York for his heart operation. It was decided he should have a heart operation before we did anything with the kidney, and I said to him, "I should come with you. I want to come with you to New York and hold your hand." And he said he wanted me to come with him. So that's what we did. And, ah, that's the only reference, really, prior to quite recently, just before the operation, that we ever talked about it, and I can remember him joking as we walked down the corridor together of RPA after doing some tests, and saying that, my God, as a non-drinker he was about to get MY kidney, 'cause he knows that I like a little drop of red every now and again. And I told him subsequently that he was getting the kidney that filtered out the cabernet merlot, so he's got to start drinking.

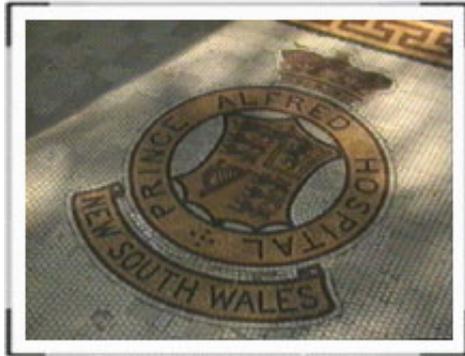
PROF JOHN HORVATH (Kerry Packer's Physician): Transplantation is not a small thing. I'm fortunate that I have about 70 people who work with me in preparing any single transplant. I think it's very important when we're dealing with living donation that there are two medical teams involved. The recipient needs a team, and I've been privileged to be the recipient, Mr Packer's physician, and my concern was looking after him. And the donor has his own team, and that was looked after by Professor Tiller, who assessed the donor and made sure he was fit and safe, and all the other issues that go with it.

PROF DAVID TILLER (Nick Ross's Physician): I met Nick first about two and a half years ago, and we sat and talked and I asked him why he was doing this. And he said, "Well, look", he said, "I'm a mate. He said, "I'd like to do something." He might have said, "For the old buggar." I can't remember the exact words he used, but it was something like that. And I got the feeling at the end of it that this guy was a genuine donor, that he wasn't...that no-one had nobbled him, that no-one had come along to say, "You should be giving your kidney to Kerry." Um, and I had the feeling that he was a genuine friend, he'd been around for a long while, they knew one another, they understood where they were both coming from, and we took it from there.

In a sense, I try to paint a sort of grim picture up front, so that this is a big surgical

procedure, that there are complications, as there are of any surgical procedure, and that the procedure, of course, is completely unnecessary for him, in medical terms.

There's a risk of anaesthetic death, very, very rare, but it occurs. There are complications with the surgery, I mean, there were none, but we talked about the problems of wound infection, the problems of pain, the problems of discomfort. Then there were the post-operative things - the business of getting clots in your legs and clots in your lungs, and all of those things, and he was quite correctly anxious about it. He said, "Oh, this worries me a bit." And I said to him, "Well, we can stop this." "No, no", he said. But he said, "I am anxious."



KERRY PACKER: I chose RPA because, you know, one of the few things in life that, ah...that money does for you is it doesn't restrict you to where you have to go, so I went and set out to find out who was the best transplant team in the world. No, it's not the operation, please...and that's not belittling the people who gave me the operation, don't misunderstand me. The handling of a transplant is the stopping of rejection. It's the administration of drugs after, and keeping the kidney healthy, alive, functioning, not rejecting, and that's a very special art, it's not actually a surgical art. It's a general practitioner's art, and it's a drug art, and the people at RPA are regarded as as good as anyone in the world, and I've checked everywhere in the world.

NICK ROSS: Having made my mind up that this is what I really wanted to do, I never, ever faltered in that. I made the decision and that was it. Karin had more misgivings than me, for all the right reasons.

KARIN LEE: I had the usual concerns that any partner would have, I think, but I spoke to the doctors. They managed to assure me that the risks were minimal.

NICK ROSS: It became apparent that Kerry was actually really very ill, and rapidly getting worse, to a point where he was probably not going to last very much longer. I had to have a very serious think about it again, and I did that. I spent a very restless night. Kerry and I did not sit down and discuss this until two days before the operation. It was almost as if we didn't need to say anything. We just knew that when the time came for us to do this, we'd sit down quietly and talk about it just beforehand, and that was it, but I think he was a little bit embarrassed at first. When we finally had our conversation about what was going to happen in two day's time, it was classic Kerry and Nick conversation, really. It was... talked about virtually everything else except that. At the end of the evening, when I left, we just shook hands and he gave me a bit of a hug, and I said, "I'll see you on Tuesday morning." And that was it!

PROF TILLER: The operation took place in the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney in November. This is a big procedure for the day. You've got to go through muscles, you often have to move ribs around, so there's a great deal of healing to occur after the procedure's over. The kidney's then taken out of its normal place, and in the recipient is put down into the pelvis. Often, the recipient is less uncomfortable after the operation than the donor is.

KARIN LEE: The day of the operation was very stressful for me, and I very quickly broke down. When Nick first came out of surgery, I was in the room waiting for him, and, ah, the first thing he said as they wheeled him through the door was, "I want it back." Which is typical Nick, you know. He was completely drugged up, they'd given him huge doses of pain-killers before they wheeled him back up, but that sense of humour never disappeared.

NICK ROSS: As soon as I was able to be aware of what was going on, I was very keen to find out how Kerry was, obviously. He couldn't get to see me, because he was definitely bed-bound, whereas I wasn't, so I actually got out of bed and shuffled down the corridor to see him. And he looked fantastic! He had colour in his face, he looked really good, he looked, probably better, facially, he looked better than I'd seen him for years. I didn't stay very long, we just shook hands and said all sorts of silly little things and I left. As soon as he was able to get out of bed, a couple of days later, he came and did the same to me, shuffled up the end and came to visit me, so we were a pair of shufflers, really, for a week.

KERRY PACKER: Oh, I don't know about very happy. You're a bit sore after the operations, you're a bit selfish after the operation, you're delighted the other bloke's done well, but you're also saying, Jesus, I hope this stops hurting soon. You know, you've got to... do you understand what a major operation is? A major operation is what YOU have. And do you know what a minor operation is? That's the operation the bloke in the bed next door has. And that's the difference.

NICK ROSS: Being the pair of rascals that we are, and because we could, we escaped after six days. I'm talking about escaping from hospital. Kerry was determined to get out before me, and I said, "You're not going to do it," so we left virtually together. I really didn't need very much after-care. I just had to be careful. In Kerry's case, obviously, he's got more after-care, much more after-care. He has to go every day to the hospital for blood tests, biopsies and all this sort of stuff. I'm very concerned for him.

KERRY PACKER: You get rejections, you get the kidney not working properly, you get a lot of drugs and you get knocked around. I mean, I've been on it now for 14 weeks, or whatever it is, drugs. Ah, I get rejections, I have to go back to hospital, I have to get blood tests, I have to all the time. Now, all of those things, you say to yourself, it's a pain in the backside. But by comparison with the alternative, it's nothing. I mean, it's absolutely nothing. Within six months, within nine months, within a year, I'll have this beaten. I'll have it, it'll be there, it'll be settled down. I'll

be able to lead a normal, relatively normal, life - very normal life. I'll be able to go away, I'll be able to go and see things, I'll be able to go and do things. On the other hand, if I was on a dialysis machine, I'd be on a dialysis machine, they say, six hours a day, but in reality, it's nearer to nine by the time you get there, and get hooked up and everything, and that's three or four times a week. So you're on a machine lying down in a bed for three or four hours.....for eight or nine hours a day, three or four days a week. You can't go anywhere, you have no mobility, you have no freedom, and you never get better. All that ever happens is you get a little bit worse. And your creatinine gets worse, and eventually, you die.

PROF JOHN HORVATH: We expect more than 90% of people who've had a transplant to be well with their kidney after 12 months. Around 85%-90% have got a kidney working at the 3-5 year mark. Now, I've got some people nearly 30 years now, who've had a successful transplant and are still well. We've been very lucky that this has been an extremely successful transplant. Ah, Mr Packer went home in six days, and we've had very little in the way of any significant concerns since then.

NICK ROSS: It's very important for me, post-operation, to try and get fit. I certainly haven't felt any difference with the fact that I now only have one kidney. I still have a little soreness from the operation, but that will go away. I managed to have my first glass of red on the night I came out of hospital, and been going at it steadily ever since, really.

Giving my kidney to Kerry has been interesting from the point of view that I've been able to tell him, in no uncertain terms, that he's got to give up smoking and start drinking, and he's agreed to do both of those.

KERRY PACKER: Well, I've always been a teetotaller, contrary to everybody's understanding. I mean, I've got a face of a drinker, but the truth of the matter is I've always been a teetotaller. Ah, and, you know, Nick doesn't look like a drinker, but he's got a drinker's kidney, and I don't know that the kidney can handle much more milk. And, ah, I don't know that I could handle the amount of scotch that it could handle. But, I'm sure we'll come to some arrangement.

NICK ROSS: I've tried to tell him in my own way that what I've done should give him a really good quality of life. I know he has a problem giving up cigarettes and everything, like a lot of people. He does try, he tries really hard. and this time, I think I've got him. I think he knows that I don't want to waste this gift, and he's aware of that, he doesn't want to waste it either. The biggest thing, I feel, is that I've been able to give somebody a new life. It's a really special feeling that I didn't realise I would have when I entered into this. If there are any down sides to this whole thing, it's probably the fact that both in the media, and also, a couple of people have said things, not directly to me, but about me, with regard to me receiving some kind of financial inducement to do this, which is entirely, absolutely wrong, and it's very, very disappointing for me. I feel quite strongly about it. The fact that it's actually illegal is neither here nor there. It's... As far as

I'm concerned, it's a moral thing. You don't give organs away for money, you do it for greater things than that.

KERRY PACKER: What Nick's done has been fantastic, but what I also think and what I'd like to say to anyone who's looking at this program, is the gift you can give is beyond your comprehension. And, ah, if you have someone you love, someone you really like, someone you really want to help, you can do them the most wonderful service, the most wonderful act of friendship, and, you know, there's a lot of misunderstandings about kidneys. They don't have to match. They don't have to be the same. They've got to have... They've got the same chance of matching 50-50 as they have 95-5. And, ah, the difference to people's lives that you can make, if you're brave enough to make that decision, and if you decide that you want to, you know, it's just such a wonderful gift you can give, and I can't say how much the people who get it will appreciate it. Good luck to you all.

NICK ROSS: Before the operation, I seriously had considered retiring. I've got my boat, and I want to be able to still enjoy it, still be capable of enjoying it. And I told Kerry this, too, and certainly in the longer term I don't want to be still his personal pilot, when I'm wandering around with a walking stick and saying, "Oh, remember when we were only 35. Ideally, I think I'd like to base myself in the Whitsunday Islands, and just go off and sail around all the beautiful places of the world. I'm hoping that Karen will come with me.



Donations from non-family members currently make up a tiny number of transplants. In 1998 less than 2 per cent.

The Australian Donor Register can be reached on 1800 777 203.

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