

the one person who changed my life

What does it take to forever alter the course of someone's life? Sometimes it's an incredible act of selflessness; other times it's simply a word of advice. Meet four people who prove that one person really can make all the difference

by Anne Cassidy



Carin Turk (right) with son Joshua and surrogate Alison Dolbeer.

ROARK JOHNSON, HAIR & MAKEUP BY KRISTIN LAMAR.

1 the gift of life

For five years, Carin Turk, 38, and her husband, Scott, tried to have a baby. She thought it would be easy. "When we first started trying, I got pregnant within a month," says Carin, a speech therapist in Chicago. "We were ecstatic." But five and a half weeks later, she miscarried. Carin and Scott were devastated, especially since she'd been told that the removal of her left ovary in her 20s due to an ovarian cyst wouldn't affect her ability to get pregnant—but she believes it did. And other medical problems, such as endometriosis, made it even more difficult for her to conceive.

So the couple decided to try fertility treatments, starting with the fertility drug Clomid and artificial insemination. Carin then endured daily progesterone injections in preparation for in vitro fertilization. After a failed retrieval of her own eggs, she and Scott turned to donor eggs. But the miscarriages continued—three in all. "Each time a treatment didn't work, I became more depressed," she says. "It was tough for me to even be around

babies at that point. It was just too heartwrenching."

Eventually, after coming to the hard realization that fertility treatments weren't going to work, Carin and Scott opted for surrogacy. "We'd been discussing it as an option with our fertility clinic all along," says Carin. "Now it was time to really pursue it." The agency that had found her donor eggs soon found Alison Dolbeer, who lived just an hour away in Midlothian, a suburb south of Chicago.

"I'd thought about being a surrogate for a long time," says Alison, 35, who has two children of her own, ages 11 and 5. "Something in me wanted to help another woman become a mom." So after doing some research on surrogacy, Alison talked it over with her husband, then signed up with a surrogates agency.

"From the moment we met Alison, we knew she was the one," says Carin. "All of us were supposed to go home after that first meeting, think it over and let the agency know within 48 hours if we accepted each other. Scott and I didn't even make it home! We called (Please turn to 30)

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CONTINUED the agency from the car to say yes." The Dolbeers didn't need 48 hours either—they called in their approval the very next day.

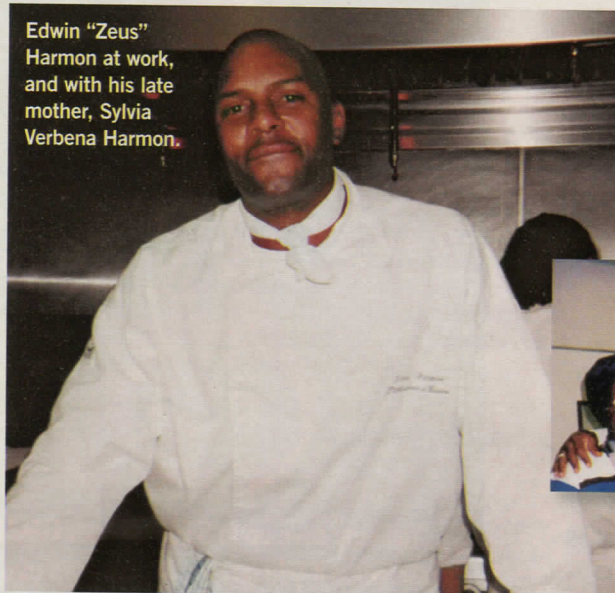
At first, Carin was convinced that Alison wouldn't get pregnant when two embryos from donor eggs were implanted in her uterus. But Alison assured Carin that everything would be fine. "She even gave me a little stuffed bear kneeling in prayer with a note that read, *Dear Carin, The bear's name is Hope. We hope we can give hope to the two of you,*" recalls Carin.

The lucky bear did its job: Alison got pregnant, and whenever she had a doctor's appointment, Carin went

along. "Even when it was just an appointment for the doctor to measure her belly, I went," says Carin. "The first big milestone was hearing the heartbeat. I'd always miscarried before I'd reached that stage."

On October 23, 2009, baby Joshua was born, weighing in at 9 pounds, 7 ounces. Carin and Scott were there to witness it all, and even cut the umbilical cord. "I couldn't imagine feeling any closer to Alison than at that moment," says Carin. And in the year since Joshua's birth, the two have remained close. They talk regularly, email and take their kids to the zoo together. Alison even has a brag book of Joshua's photos.

If all goes well, Alison has agreed to give Joshua a little brother or sister next spring. Carin and Scott were going to wait to broach the topic of another surrogate pregnancy, but Alison brought it up first, while she was still pregnant. "I was floored," says Carin. "I asked her, 'Would you really be willing to do this again?' and she said, 'Oh my God, in a heartbeat.' I started crying and hugging her and saying thank you over and over again. I don't think of Alison as a surrogate. I think of her as my lifelong friend, and that bond will never be broken. She gave me hope, she gave me courage, she gave me support, but above all else, she gave me my son."



Edwin "Zeus" Harmon at work, and with his late mother, Sylvia Verbena Harmon.

2 food for the soul

When Edwin "Zeus" Harmon, restaurant chef at the InterContinental Harbor Court Baltimore hotel, is whipping up his signature bread pudding with Liberian sauce, he's thinking about his mom, Sylvia Verbena Harmon, who inspired him to pursue his passion for cooking. Sylvia's kitchen in their home outside Monrovia, Liberia, was more than a place to make family meals; it also served as home base for her busy catering business. "My mother was always making fruitcakes, birthday

cakes, wedding cakes. She fed everyone who came in the door," says Zeus, 45. "No one left our house hungry."

With so much baking to do, Sylvia enlisted the help of her eight children. Zeus took to it the most. "She needed manpower to stir the batter, and I was a big kid"—which is how he got his nickname. As a teenager, he took over part of the business, making all the birthday cakes himself. "I assisted so much, it was like we were one person," he says.

As Zeus became more adept in the kitchen—helping his mom with savory dishes as well as her famous sweets—Sylvia took notice. "She saw that I had talent," he says. And she would know: Sylvia graduated from Le Cordon Bleu in Paris in 1959. In fact, says Zeus, "she was among the first black women to graduate from the school." And throughout the '70s, Sylvia put her culinary skills to work in the Liberian president's executive mansion, cooking for many visiting dignitaries including former President Jimmy Carter. "She was the best chef I've ever known," says Zeus.

After graduating college in the U.S., Zeus worked as a residence hall director at his alma mater, West Virginia State University, for several years. But he kept cooking, creating incredible meals for family gatherings and get-togethers with friends. "Whenever my mom would call or come visit she'd take me aside and say, 'Why not cook? That would make me so happy.'"

It wasn't until he was in a car crash in 2000 that he finally took her advice. "After the accident, I realized that I wanted a career I felt more passionate (Please turn to 32)

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CONTINUED about," he says. He enrolled at L'Academie de Cuisine in Gaithersburg, Maryland. When he told Sylvia the news, she was ecstatic. "It was like a burden had been lifted off her," says Zeus. "She didn't have to worry anymore about me not being fulfilled."

Since graduating from L'Academie de Cuisine in 2001, he's been at the Harbor Court hotel, working his way up from intern to restaurant chef. Every day spent preparing dishes that translate the pungent flavors of West African cuisine to a mid-Atlantic audience fills Zeus with the same joy of cooking he came to know when he was young.

Sadly, Sylvia died of cancer in 2004, but he keeps her Le Cordon Bleu diploma, her photo and other mementos in a special spot in his apartment. And when he goes out into the hotel's dining room to chat with guests, he tells them stories about his mom. About how she grew up in Liberia and graduated from Le Cordon Bleu. About how she cooked for kings and presidents. About her amazing bread pudding, which is now his signature dish. (For the recipe, go to womansday.com/pudding.) "My mom's cooking always made people happy, and I want to do the same with my food," he says.



Cheryl Rainford with
daughter Molly, and
with kidney donor
Doug Cutchins.

3 you've got a friend

Cheryl Rainford was just 30 years old when she got the devastating news: Her kidneys were failing. The chronic kidney infection she'd been battling for a year with medication was getting worse. She'd need dialysis and, eventually, a kidney transplant. "My stamina was shot," says Cheryl, a writer and editor, now 40, who was

living in Des Moines at the time. "I'd been getting weaker for months—there were times I was so weak that my husband, Jon, had to carry me."

None of her family members was a candidate for a kidney donation, so Cheryl resigned herself to spending three years (the average then; it's even longer now) (Please turn to 34)

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CONTINUED waiting for a donor. "The dialysis was my only hope then," she says. "I knew without it I'd die, so that's what I held on to."

One summer evening in 2001, a month after she'd begun dialysis, Cheryl and Jon were having dinner with her old high school friend Doug Cutchins and his wife. He knew about Cheryl's health and during dinner he said, "I want to email all our high school friends and ask if anyone is willing to be a donor. What's the first thing you need to know?" Cheryl told him that any prospective donor would need to have O positive blood. Stunned, Doug stared across the table at her and said, "I'm O positive." He got tested and, amazingly, he turned out to be a match.

"I was amazed that he would even consider giving me his kidney," says Cheryl, especially since theirs was a casual friendship. But Doug is too humble to make a big deal about it: "She needed a kidney, I had one to spare, so I decided to give it to her," he says matter-of-factly.

Today Cheryl is in perfect health. "I owe Doug such a deep debt of gratitude," she says. "He's my hero." But Doug doesn't see himself that way at all. "Millions of people could do what I did," he says. Since the transplant, the two have stayed close, even though Cheryl and her family moved to Columbus, Ohio, in 2010. "It's hard to describe how I feel about her," he says, his voice catching. But it's easy for Cheryl: "Doug is another brother in my heart."



Rosetta Harper
shares a good book
with her son
Johnathan.

4 a son's wish

As a child, Johnathan Harper, 29, knew that his mother, Rosetta, 52, had trouble reading. His two sisters knew it too. They'd often see their mom lingering over a letter or a form she had to sign, struggling to make out the words. Sometimes Rosetta asked them to help her sound out words, since it was only with her husband and kids in their Atlanta home that she felt comfortable admitting her difficulties. "I never wanted anyone else to find

out," says Rosetta, who had an undiagnosed learning disability and could only read at an elementary-school level, despite being a high school graduate.

Over the years, she married, had children and worked as a server in a school cafeteria. She was offered promotions, but never took them. "I could have been a manager," Rosetta says. "But when you do office work, you have to be good at vocabulary." So she stuck with what she knew and kept the truth to herself.

Growing up with his mom's secret was hard for Johnathan. He wasn't ashamed of her; he loved her too much for that. But he did hurt for her. "My mom is a hardworking woman, but she didn't have the education she needed," he says. "She deserved better."

Johnathan desperately wanted to help Rosetta make the most of her life,

"My mom is a hardworking woman, but she didn't have the education she needed...I just showed her where the door was. She was the one who walked through it."

but he didn't know how. Then, one day when he was 17, he saw a commercial on TV for a program called Project Read. The message: Even adults could learn the skills they needed. He immediately told his mother about the commercial. "Mama, why don't you go and get help?" Johnathan said. "I think that would be a good thing." He pestered her so much that she wrote down the telephone number and eventually took a deep breath and called it. "After all the years of pretending, I was finally ready to get help, thanks to my son," Rosetta says.

Getting through the program wasn't easy, she admits. For the first time since elementary school, Rosetta had to read aloud. She tripped over words, and the embarrassment stung. "I was very emotional because I didn't want to make mistakes," she says. But she persisted. And Johnathan was right there, cheering her on.

More than a decade later, she doesn't have to pretend anymore. "Johnathan's encouragement changed my life," she says. Now she can read a novel, a recipe, a letter from a friend. Learning to read as an adult "has helped me tremendously with my self-confidence. I'm not afraid of what I don't know."

She wasn't afraid to change jobs, either. Today she's a nanny, and one of the things she likes best about caring for kids is reading to them. "Children love when you read aloud, and I put a lot of drama into my stories," she says with a laugh. "Someday I want to write a children's book."

She has another important goal as well: helping others learn to read. To that end, Rosetta serves on the board of Literacy Volunteers of Atlanta, where she's able to encourage young people and adults with learning disabilities "to step out of the box and ask for help. Once you allow someone to know your problem, you free yourself," she says. "It doesn't matter what age you are. My son taught me that." But Johnathan, a minister, college senior and third-degree black belt who teaches kids karate, says he doesn't deserve any special credit for helping his mom. "I just showed her where the door was," he says. "She was the one who walked through it." ■

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