Two Washington University Law former classmates discovered anew the life-changing power and importance of friendship when one of them needed a kidney, and the other came up a match.
ERIN BRADDOCK had already lost two brothers, tragically. One died in an auto accident, and one was murdered at age 19 in Atlanta. Last year, when Washington University law school friend Tony Jackson, JD ’02, needed a kidney, Braddock recalls. Helping Jackson, who had been diagnosed with end stage renal disease, was one of those things. “Here was an opportunity for Tony, his kids, and his wife to lead a more normal life, and I had an opportunity to help.”

The story begins years earlier. Jackson was diagnosed with hypertension in 1987 and lupus in 1990. After playing basketball at the University of Notre Dame and Virginia Tech, he finished his bachelor’s degree in 1994 at Missouri Southern State College. He married his sweetheart Cassandra in 1997, and earned a master’s in public administration at the University of Missouri–Columbia in 1998. The pair moved to St. Louis in 1999, he to begin law school at Washington University and she to pursue a PhD in marriage and family counseling at Saint Louis University.

EARLY IN HIS FIRST YEAR, Jackson met Braddock. Though Jackson is nine years older, the two became fast friends, and Braddock soon got to know the family as well. Cassandra “adopted me as a little brother,” Braddock recalls. He enjoyed their home, having meals with them, and interacting with their two new daughters, both born during the law school years.

Both men graduated in 2002. Braddock took a position with the St. Louis law firm Blackwell Sanders (now Husch Blackwell Sanders). Jackson followed a more circuitous route, going first to Birmingham, Alabama, to lead community Ministries at a large church and then to Philadelphia, where he planned to enter theological seminary. At the same time, he studied for the bar. He applied several times between 2004 and 2006, but because of his deteriorating health he did not sit for the bar. Then came the renal disease diagnosis in 2005. His doctors placed him on a transplant list.

Months of testing followed. “The most difficult part,” Braddock concedes, “is the lengthiness of it. I had to take a lot of tests. There were times when I had to fly to Philadelphia and be tested there. I am blessed to work for a firm that also believed it was the right thing to do.”

Jackson was standing on a football field, the volunteer coach of a youth flag football team, when his cell phone rang; his law school friend was a match. “My wife and my kids were there,” he recalls. “We just celebrated and cried on the field.”

The surgery took place September 25, 2007, and went off without a hitch. The next day, when the medical team hoped they would each get out of bed and sit on a chair, they both topped that. Jackson walked three doors down to Braddock’s room, and Braddock walked the distance back with Jackson. There Jackson addressed Braddock from the heart. “Your act is a Godly act,” he told him. “I will never be able to repay you, but I am grateful to the grave.”

Both have recovered well. Braddock was back at work in five weeks. Jackson returned to his job with a government contractor on November 19 and began preparing for the bar exam. His physician is optimistic about his future, especially because, remarkably, he now tests free of lupus. “It’s all a miracle,” Jackson says simply.

Both acknowledge that the experience changed them. Jackson says the trial strengthened his character, helped him become more reflective—“a trait I certainly did not possess before,” he notes wryly—and deepened his appreciation for friends. Braddock agrees. “It made me understand,” he muses, “that you have to stay close to the people in your life, because you never know when you’re going to lose them. It has made me reach out to friends more.”

It also fostered a profound gratitude for his family and his co-workers. “Donation isn’t something you do by yourself,” Braddock explains. “I’m thankful for the people in my life who have supported me, the people I worked with who covered for me, my family, my fiancée, her daughter. They were there for me when I needed them. They helped me get through the painful part, and they reminded me why I did it.”

And he’s grateful for the opportunity to make a difference. “My kidney was my gift to Tony,” he says. “Seeing how it changed the quality of life for him and his family was his gift back to me, and I’m forever thankful.”