

Baseball great rod carew owes his life to NFL player's transplanted organs

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Mary Reuland (left), with Rod and Rhonda Carew (right). Photo: American Heart Association

(HealthDay)— When Baseball Hall of Famer Rod Carew received a new heart and kidney last December, he and his family had no idea who they had to thank for the lifesaving organs.

But some good sleuthing by Carew's wife and the mother of the anonymous donor unearthed a startling discovery: The organs had come from former National Football League tight end Konrad Reuland, who was only 29 when he died after suffering a brain aneurysm.

Carew, 71, needed the new organs because of a massive [heart](#) attack he had in 2015, which was followed by subsequent complications. He received the new organs in an operation performed at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles.

After the transplant, a number of Carew's family and friends asked Carew's wife, Rhonda, if the new organs might have come from Reuland. That prompted her to begin investigating.

She learned the donor was a healthy local man who was 29 when he died. That happened to be the same number Carew wore during his 19-year baseball career.

Both the Carews and Reulands were long-time Orange County residents. And, being pro athletes, Carew and Reuland knew a lot of the same people, many of whom wondered about a possible connection between donor and recipient.

Reuland's mother, Mary, first heard about the possible link on Dec. 23 at a private dinner following her son's funeral and burial. The next day, she went online to learn more about Carew and discovered that he fit the brief description she'd received about the heart and kidney recipient, a 71-year-old man from Orange County treated at Cedars-Sinai.

She also learned that Carew received his new organs on Dec. 16, the day she had been told her son's final organ was transplanted.

Convinced of the connection, she contacted Rhonda Carew and they began their investigation. The first question was timing. Reuland died two days before Carew was notified that a [new heart](#) and kidney were available, and it was another day-and-a-half until the transplant was performed. The women wondered if a heart could last that long.

But even though he was brain dead, Konrad Reuland was kept on life support so his tissues and organs could be donated. His heart was recovered last.

There was also the matter of the age difference. Typically, a 71-year-old would not receive organs from a 29-year-old. But, Konrad Reuland had a trace of hepatitis B, so the recipient had to be immune to the virus to avoid developing the disease. That disqualified all potential recipients ahead of Carew.

But Rhonda Carew still had doubts because Rod has B-negative blood, one of the rarest types. However, she then learned that Konrad Reuland was type O, the universal blood type that can go to any recipient.

Mary Reuland contacted organ procurement officials asking for verification that Rod Carew had received her son's heart and kidney. The officials were amazed because they'd never heard of an anonymously matched transplant between families who knew each other.

Rod Carew's family gave him time to recover and only told him the identity of his donor after he had left a rehabilitation facility in late January.

"When he looked at me in total disbelief, that's when I knew he truly

understood it," Rhonda Carew said in an American Heart Association news release.

Rod wanted to meet the Reulands as soon as possible so Mary Reuland and her husband, Ralf, could listen to their son's heart beating inside Carew's chest. That happened on March 2.

"I really believe that if we'd met under different circumstances, we'd be close friends," Mary Reuland told Rhonda Carew.

"We will be now," Rhonda replied.

More information: The U.S. National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute has more on [heart transplantation](#).

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