

Home » News » Perfect Strangers

# Perfect Strangers

*Stanford professor Jan Krawitz’s documentary raises questions about what motivates an individual towards an extreme act of compassion*

by Leila Glass on Saturday, February 14, 2015 - 1:36pm

“People are surprised when they find out what I’m doing,” the woman says to the camera, repeating what will become a theme in the documentary. The camera cuts cryptically to scenes from a hospital, then back to the woman. Her name is Eldonna, “Ellie” for short. She is in her fifties, with pink highlights and a youthful energy. As the story unfolds, we realize that she is preparing to donate her kidney to a stranger.

Her story was captured as part of filmmaker [Jan Krawitz](#)’s documentary *Perfect Strangers*, which raises questions about what motivates an individual towards an extreme act of compassion. Krawitz, who is a Stanford professor of Documentary Film and Video, screened the documentary and participated in a question-and-answer session at the Clayman Institute for Gender Research’s winter Artist’s Salon.

The 70-minute documentary follows Ellie’s journey over four years. While she is taking a course at community college, she meets a student with kidney disease and becomes interested in organ donation. As she says, simply, “It was about becoming aware of a need and being able to do something about it.”

Ellie begins to research possible matches and finds a woman online named Kathy who has been on dialysis five nights a week for years. We see Kathy eating Christmas dinner one-handed while her other arm is bound up in wires and tubes; the large, white dialysis machine is an obtuse presence in the cozy living room.



Ellie wants to donate her kidney to Kathy, but when they are not a match, Ellie chooses to donate to a complete stranger instead. The film follows Ellie before and after surgery, as well as Kathy, who eventually gets a kidney from a deceased organ donor. Along the way, the people Ellie meets are amazed by her choice; except her son, who says, “I was not surprised at all.”

In that understated moment, we glimpse that Ellie’s kidney donation is just one of many ways she has chosen to be a compassionate and giving person.

Krawitz says she does not expect viewers to “go out and donate an organ” after seeing the film, but she does hope that it encourages people to ask themselves what they are doing for others, like Ellie, to be compassionate towards people in their own lives. One action is often the simplest way to start a journey that can empower yourself and others in your environment.

## A Q&A with filmmaker Jan Krawitz

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- Academia (186)
- Art & Literature (73)
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- Influential Voices (15)
- Law (23)
- Leadership & Advocacy (162)
- Medicine & Science (53)
- Negotiation (4)
- Policy & Government (77)
- Technology (33)
- Uncategorized (2)
- Work & Career (128)



**You mentioned that you have been showing your film to people in the medical field as well as to lay people. What are you hoping those different audiences take away from it?**

*Perfect Strangers* motivates people to look at their own morality and life choices ... while also creating awareness of the pressing scarcity of organs and the compromised lifestyle of dialysis patients.

By normalizing the act of kidney donation, *Perfect Strangers* may plant a seed in the viewer as it demystifies and “normalizes” the process of organ donation. It has caused people to register as a deceased donor, if they haven’t already done so.

**How did you find Ellie and get interested in her story?**

In the spring of 2007, I received an email from her lamenting the fact that she had been unable to find any documentaries about altruistic kidney donation while researching a class paper on the topic, and wondering if I might be interested in doing a documentary on this topic?

She was a credible protagonist because her motives were based on a very basic philosophy expressed in one of our early email exchanges:

“When people ask why I'm doing this, I answer with a quote by Miep Gies, Anne Frank's shelterer. ‘I did what I had to do because it is the right thing to do — that is all. ... Anyone...can turn on a small light in a dark room.’”

## Jan Krawitz



Documentary Filmmaker and former Director, M.F.A. Program in Documentary Film and Video, Stanford University Professor in Department of Art & Art History, School of Humanities & Sciences

Jan Krawitz has been independently producing documentary films for thirty years. Her work has been exhibited and awarded at film festivals in the United States and abroad, among them Sundance, Nyon, Edinburgh, Margaret Mead, London, Sydney, Full Frame, South by Southwest (SXSW), Ann Arbor, and the New York Film Festival. Films directed by Krawitz include [Big Enough](#), [In Harm's Way](#), [Mirror Mirror](#), [Drive-in Blues](#), [Little People, P.M.](#), [Cotton Candy and Elephant Stuff](#), and [Styx](#). Jan Krawitz joined the Department of Communication at Stanford University in 1988 after teaching film production and film studies for eight years at the University of Texas at Austin. In 2006, she moved to the Department of Art & Art History at Stanford University. Further information about Jan Krawitz and her work is available from her [Faculty Profile](#) and her [website](#).

## Leila Glass



PhD student in Linguistics

Leila Glass is a PhD candidate in Linguistics. She is interested in semantics, social meaning, and corpus methods.

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