

THE BEST HE HAD TO OFFER, a book written by Cynthia B. Herrick
Reviewed by Jim Gleason, heart recipient, 10/19/94

This very short book, 54 large format pages, is a romantic sharing by the loving wife of Ron Herrick of their life together long after he had become the world's first organ donor back in December of 1954. With his identical twin brother, Richard, dying from kidney failure, Ron shares through his wife's writings how, holding back a sob, he says of his decision in an interview, "I had to do it or he'd die. I had no choice, so I did it. I couldn't let him die."

This story of brotherly love, told in simple and easy to read language, sets the tone for this whole book. While Cynthia was not in Ron's life at the time of this historic kidney transplant event, she does a wonderful job of retelling details of the event that served as the precursor for over 400,000 organ transplants that eventually followed the pioneering work of the first transplant surgeon, Dr. Joe Murray. The book does not get into heavy medical jargon and surgical detail, but the emotions and risks of that early surgery come across to the reader in a very human way. The actual event is covered in just a couple of pages midway in Ron's life story, set among several anniversary ceremonies at the 25th and later the 50th milestones of this groundbreaking event. For those to whom such surgery has become commonplace in recent years, it is very moving to revisit and "feel" the danger and uncertainty surrounding kidney transplants back in the mid fifties. If the surgery had failed, we are reminded that the surgeon's reputation might have been ruined for life, instead of the Nobel winning recognition that Dr. Murray eventually received for his courageous decision and later works.

Back then the donor had to be a living donor and the recipient not just a "match," but an identical twin to the donor. There were no drugs to prevent rejection until years later, a point brought out in brief "news" entries that pepper this very ordinary story of a very extraordinary man who, when encouraged on the eve of that historic surgery to, "Get out of here! Don't do it." by his dying brother, simply responds with "I'm here and I'm going to stay and that's it." With his brother's kidney, Richard lives for another fruitful eight years, with very little fanfare or notoriety for either of them.

The book's real message, along with the history of transplantation that is very briefly mentioned in highlights as the story unfolds over the next 50 years, is how ordinary a life this historic donor goes on to live. It tells us a simple family story, with great detail on the daily life that Ron and Cynthia share, culminating with the big 50th anniversary celebrations at the 2004 US Transplant Games in Minneapolis. As a heart recipient who was there to see Ron, Dr. Murray and the other pioneers of transplantation at those Games, I found myself reading through tear-filled eyes, recalling the emotional events as they were told in this part of their story. I was among the thousands who were inspired and offered a standing ovation at the sight of Ron and Dr. Murray as they were recognized for their pioneering roles for which almost 2,000 of us were there, alive to share because of their work and decisions. If you were there at the 2004 Games, I hope you will read and feel such emotions too. If you weren't able to attend those Games, this reading may be your second best way to experience them, through Cynthia's love filled

words telling a story she has lived these many years through memories shared by a quiet and unassuming hero, her husband, Ron Herrick.

Ron, let me say thanks to you on behalf of the 400,000 of us who benefited from your amazing decision to say “Yes...” when there was no statistics to predict your success as we have today. And to Cynthia, thank you for allowing us to share in your lives through your writing, so we may understand our “miracles” through the eyes of those who lived the history that led us to this place in our transplanted lives today.