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Episode 84: The Nicholas Effect
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PHOEBE JUDGE: Do you keep track of the number of places that are named after your son in Italy?

REG GREEN: Yes. There are something like 150 of them.

PHOEBE JUDGE This is Reg Green.

(AS

NARRATOR):

REG GREEN: Many schools, bicycle paths, parks, playgrounds-- things where kids can be happy.

PHOEBE JUDGE There's a Nicholas Green Kindergarten in Turin, a Nicholas Green Piazza outside of Florence, a Nicholas Green

(AS Street in the suburbs of Naples, and a Nicholas Green Amphitheater in a town called Amaroni. There's also a

NARRATOR): soccer cup named after Nicholas, a writing competition, and a chain of coffee shops.

MAGGIE Reg showed me a picture just the other day of a Nicholas Green Cafe--

GREEN:

PHOEBE JUDGE Maggie Green, Nicholas's mother.

(AS

NARRATOR):

MAGGIE --with Nicholas's picture on the wall, 5 feet high.

GREEN:

ELEANOR His name is all over the place.

GREEN:

PHOEBE JUDGE Nicholas's sister, Eleanor.

(AS

NARRATOR):

ELEANOR And it does sort of astound me that people are still thinking about him. He still appears in people's minds, like he

GREEN: does for me.

PHOEBE JUDGE People in Italy have been thinking about Nicholas Green for 30 years.

(AS

NARRATOR):

ELEANOR You know, to me, he's a person. But to others, he really represents an idea. So many people feel like they know

GREEN: him. They know Nicholas.

PHOEBE JUDGE: I'm Phoebe Judge, and *This is Love*.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

PHOEBE JUDGE Nicholas Green was born September 9, 1987 in Northern California.

**(AS
NARRATOR):**

MAGGIE He was my first, and we just thought he was amazing.

GREEN:

PHOEBE JUDGE His younger sister Eleanor was born 2 and 1/2 years later.

**(AS
NARRATOR):**

PHOEBE JUDGE: Were they close as kids?

MAGGIE Yes, I think so. Even at a young age, boys and girls tend to be a little bit different, so there's a little distance. But,
GREEN: yeah, they-- I mean, they shared a room, and Eleanor was happy to tag along and join in with Nicholas and his friends.

ELEANOR He loved to play Robin Hood. That was his favorite character was Robin Hood. But he would say, no, you can't be
GREEN: Maid Marian. You have to be the chicken-- which was the only other female character [LAUGHS] in the Disney version of *Robin Hood*. So-- [CHUCKLES] so I have little memories of that. But he was also-- I have memories of him trying to cheer me up. He would make silly names or do silly sounds.

REG GREEN: There was a certain funny feeling of goodness about Nicholas. And so when you were with him, you wanted to live up to his expectations.

PHOEBE JUDGE Reg and Maggie Green traveled a lot when their kids were young. And when Nicholas was 7 and Eleanor was 4,
(AS they decided to take a family vacation to Switzerland and Italy. They started their trip in the Swiss Alps, and then
NARRATOR): traveled to Rome and Pompeii. Their next stop was Sicily, and they decided to make the drive at night while the kids were asleep. As they were driving down the highway at around 10:30 PM, Reg noticed a car that was following close behind them.

REG GREEN: And I wondered, there is just something wrong here.

PHOEBE JUDGE Finally, it seemed like the car was going to pass them, but it didn't. It pulled up alongside their car. And Reg and
(AS Maggie heard shouting.
NARRATOR):

REG GREEN: Harsh, piercing voices, obviously telling us to pull over. There were two masked men in the car. One was waving a pistol. And it seemed to me that if we did stop, we'd be at their mercy. So instead, I accelerated. They accelerated too.

And then a shot rang out. And the window behind where I was driving was shattered-- glass flying everywhere. Maggie turned around to make sure the kids were safe. Both were in their car seats. Both were seemed to be sleeping peacefully. And by this time, we were beginning to pull away from these people.

PHOEBE JUDGE Reg kept driving, until he saw a police car pulled over on the side of the road. It was stopped at an accident.
(AS
NARRATOR):

REG GREEN: So I pulled over and tried to explain what had happened. They were very impatient with us. They couldn't understand what we were trying to say. So I went into the-- opened the car door, and the interior light came on. And when it did, Nicholas didn't move. And I knew then that something terrible had happened.

PHOEBE JUDGE (AS NARRATOR): When the men had fired into the car, a bullet had hit the back of Nicholas's head. He was alive but unconscious. An ambulance at the scene took Nicholas to a nearby hospital. Reg and Maggie were interviewed by the police about what had happened. But they didn't speak any Italian, and the police didn't speak English.

MAGGIE GREEN: That first night in that little police station, they woke up the local English professor to be the translator. And then they did anything they could. I remember they gave us a loaf of bread and some marmalade-- some sort of the only thing they could do to help out.

REG GREEN: They asked over and over again, do you know anyone in Italy who might have a grudge against you? Did you stop anywhere and show your American money? Could you have upset someone and you-- none of those things are as true.

PHOEBE JUDGE (AS NARRATOR): Nicholas was moved to a bigger hospital in Messina, a city in Northern Sicily. He was in a coma. People started to hear about what had happened. One newspaper reporting on the shooting called it "our shame."

REG GREEN: One of the most vivid memories is just how many people came to give comfort-- people off the streets, people from schools, of course, people from the hospital. They just converged on the hotel where we were staying. A lot of them didn't even speak to us. They just sat and looked sadly over at us, just indicating that they were with us.

And I remember one woman came over and said, you don't know me. I'm a nobody. But I want to tell you how very sorry I am that all this has happened. And I just want to be near you to give you whatever comfort that can be.

ELEANOR GREEN: One of the things that I appreciate a lot about my parents is that they're very honest. They don't try to hide things that are difficult. And so I know that I asked while he was in the hospital if he was going to die, and they said, I don't know. He might.

MAGGIE GREEN: It wasn't until that last day that they told us that he was brain dead, but that they would double-check and repeat the tests again in a few hours. But there was no hope at that point.

ELEANOR GREEN: There was a doctor at that hospital who spoke English. And I still don't know to this day if she knew that things had taken a turn for the worse and that this was a critical day. But she took me to the beach, on that day, just us, and so I was not there when he was declared brain dead.

I think that's probably for the best that I wasn't there. And I know that I did go into his room to say goodbye. But I don't know how much of what I'm remembering is that I've been told that or that I'm really remembering it.

REG GREEN: We sat there holding hands and not speaking very much, trying to come to terms with the idea. And it was then that Maggie said, shouldn't we donate the organs? And for the first time, I saw that some good could come out of this nothingness.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

PHOEBE JUDGE: We'll be right back.

PHOEBE JUDGE On October 1, 1994, after two days in the hospital in Sicily, Nicholas Green was taken off of life support.

**(AS
NARRATOR):**

PHOEBE JUDGE: Was this a painful decision, or did you just think, well, of course-- of course, we'll donate his organs?

MAGGIE GREEN: It was not a painful decision at all. Painful would have been if they'd had some legal requirement to leave him attached to the machines until his body gave up, which I confess was something I was afraid of. But to be able to donate his organs was-- as Reg said, it was the one good that could come out of it. Here we had a perfect body, not harmed in any way, young, strong.

PHOEBE JUDGE Doctors were able to save Nicholas's heart, liver, kidneys, pancreas cells, and his corneas. They were donated to seven people around the country, ranging in age from 11 to 43.

**(AS
NARRATOR):**

REG GREEN: Overall, Italy was about the lowest organ donation compared with the whole of Europe. And in the South, it was virtually unknown. And so when we made the decision, although we didn't know about this at that time, it was like a bombshell to the whole country.

PHOEBE JUDGE In the year before Nicholas Green's death, organ donation rates were about six donations per year for every one million people in Italy. One paper from the time cited a lack of organization and knowledge and general attitudes about brain death as reasons why. News of Nicholas's organ donation spread across the country and the world. Italians looked at organ donation as something strange. One TV reporter later said, now they understand it as a great gesture of love.

One of the most well-known TV journalists in Italy wrote an open letter to Reg and Maggie that ran on the front page of *The Milan* newspaper. "I must thank you not only for the transplants but for a lesson," he wrote. Nearly every newspaper in the country had front page commentary on Nicholas's death. Another columnist wrote, "Perhaps they do not realize how rare that gesture is in our country."

Before they left Italy, Reg, Maggie, and Eleanor met with the Italian president. He gave them a gold medal and told them that Italians admired their, quote, "generosity and courage." Maggie told reporters at the time, I would have liked Nicholas to live a long time. Now I wish the same thing for his heart.

DR. ANNA TERESA MAZZEO: Organ donation at that time was not very popular in Italy.

**TERESA
MAZZEO:**

PHOEBE JUDGE In 1994, Dr. Anna Teresa Mazzeo was a resident working in the ICU at the hospital where Nicholas died and where his organs were donated.

**(AS
NARRATOR):**

DR. ANNA TERESA MAZZEO: And we were, I would say, surprised by the fact that a family that came here in Italy to enjoy their vacation and then came back without a son still was able to this act of really beautiful generosity. That is incredible still now. And it really changed the system.

PHOEBE JUDGE In the days and months after Nicholas's death, organ donations rose in Italy. People called it The Nicholas Effect.

(AS

NARRATOR):

DR. ANNA In Italy, organ donation increased three times more almost in coincidence with this event.

TERESA

MAZZEO:

PHOEBE JUDGE: Three times?

DR. ANNA Three times, yes, almost three times more.

TERESA

MAZZEO:

PHOEBE JUDGE Nicholas was buried near his home in Northern California. At his funeral, a representative from the Italian
(AS government talked about how organ donations in Italy had dramatically increased in just a few days because of
NARRATOR): Nicholas. Nicholas's first grade teacher gave his eulogy.

MAGGIE She said, if Nicholas ever saw a kid who didn't have someone to play with, he would play with them, which is the
GREEN: highest thing you could say in a kid's eulogy, I should think.

ELEANOR There's this moment that I remember from his funeral where I looked around and I saw that everybody was
GREEN: crying.

PHOEBE JUDGE Nicholas's sister, Eleanor.

(AS

NARRATOR):

ELEANOR And I remember thinking, OK, this is something I'm-- I'm supposed to cry about this. I don't really know why
GREEN: everybody is crying about this. [CHUCKLES] But it didn't register to me. You're not-- OK, he's gone. But the idea
forever doesn't really make sense when you've been around for four years.

PHOEBE JUDGE: Did your parents explain to you that they donated his organs? Did you know what that meant at the time?

ELEANOR I don't think so. I think that that was probably a bridge too far from my understanding. And so I don't think that
GREEN: we talked about it then. Like that was something that I understood later. I think that the first time that I really
understood it was when we met up with all of the recipients, and that I-- at that point, I understood who these
people were and what their relationship was to us and to Nicholas.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

PHOEBE JUDGE: We'll be right back.

PHOEBE JUDGE Four months after Nicholas Green's death, in February of 1995, his family went back to Italy. They'd been invited
(AS to meet the recipients of Nicholas's organs. They met in a hotel in Sicily.

NARRATOR):

A 19-year-old named Maria Pia Pedalla had received Nicholas's liver. She later told a reporter that she had shown Nicholas's mother her scar. She said, it was a moment all ours-- private and important.

REG GREEN: I had expected mixed emotions from meeting them. I mean, I wanted to meet them naturally to see what the results had been. So the door opened, and they came in. Just the immediate families were there-- the fathers and the mothers, the brothers and sisters, the aunts and the uncles, the grandparents who would have been devastated if those transplantations had not taken place. Their presence there, their willingness to hold our hands, allow us to put their arms around us, made it real.

PHOEBE JUDGE Reg and Maggie Green kept in touch with some of the recipients, and they visited Italy as often as they could.
(AS They were also in Italy for the trial of the two men who were accused of shooting at their car and killing Nicholas.
NARRATOR): It was later reported that one of the men was a, quote, "emerging crime boss" and that they mistook the family's car for a car transporting jewelry from Rome.

The road that the Greens have been driving on at the time had a reputation for truck hijackings. But it was rare for cars to be targeted. During one of the proceedings, prosecutors played tape from a wiretap where one of the men was accused of saying, in a local Italian dialect, I really killed him.

REG GREEN: It was very, very orderly, very well conducted. And the jury listened. Every time I looked over at them, their attention didn't waver in any respect.

PHOEBE JUDGE Both men were eventually convicted of killing Nicholas. One was sentenced to 20 years in prison. The other was
(AS given a life sentence.
NARRATOR):

MAGGIE I was very grateful that this wasn't the most important thing for us. It's revenge, punishment, whatever. It was
GREEN: necessary, but it wasn't what we were living for. What was important to us was the life and the good things that could come afterwards and that this was really a relatively minor part, to me, of the story.

PHOEBE JUDGE Today, Italy's organ donation rate is one of the most successful in Europe. Five years after Nicholas died, Italy
(AS switched to being an opt-out rather than an opt-in organ donation system. The Nicholas Effect has been
NARRATOR): described as changing, quote, "the national consciousness."

Dr. Anna Teresa Mazzeo still works at the same hospital where Nicholas's organs were donated. She sometimes has to tell families that their loved ones in the hospital no longer have any brain function.

DR. ANNA It's kind of an earthquake for that family. And as after an earthquake, you have to give some light, give a reason
TERESA for that family to continue. And for that person, we cannot do anything anymore, unfortunately, but the person
MAZZEO: who has died can save other lives.

PHOEBE JUDGE Dr. Mazzeo says, even today, she tells the story of Nicholas Green to families considering organ donation. In
(AS 2019, the hospital's ICU was dedicated to Nicholas.
NARRATOR):

MAGGIE He's become the patron saint of organ donation in Italy.
GREEN:

REG GREEN: Yeah, he's often referred to as Piccolo Nicholas.

PHOEBE JUDGE: What does that mean?

REG GREEN: Like the instrument, the smallest of the instruments, and it just-- it's like little Nicholas.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

PHOEBE JUDGE (AS NARRATOR): Two years after Nicholas's death, a sculptor created a memorial for him in his hometown of Bodega Bay, California. It's called The Children's Bell Tower. Bell towers have been around for many centuries in Italy. Almost every town has one. The Children's Bell Tower in Bodega Bay is a steel frame, and 140 bells of all sizes hang on it. The bells were mainly donated by Italians from schools, churches, and ships. There's even a cow bell.

The biggest bell on the tower was made by the Marinelli family, who've been making bells in Italy since at least the 14th century. The bell has Nicholas's name on it as well as the names of the seven people who received his organs. Nicholas's sister Eleanor got married under the bell tower in 2018.

ELEANOR GREEN: I knew that I wanted him to be there. It was an important day to me, and he's important to me. And so to have him there, to hear the bells tinkling, that was him being there for me and being a part of my life still.

PHOEBE JUDGE: Do you still hear from Italians today about your brother?

ELEANOR GREEN: Yes. I still hear from Italians. I don't-- [CHUCKLES] I don't check Facebook very often. But when I do, there's usually a couple of messages from somebody with an Italian name that I've never met before saying, you know, I searched for your name. I was thinking about your family. I was thinking about your brother. And I wondered how you were.

There was just a couple of months ago, a classroom in Italy, they-- all the students learned about Nicholas's story, and they wrote cards to my family. And a lot of them included drawings in them. And I was in a lot of the drawings. I think that they-- as kids were connecting with me in that situation, what would it be like to be her?

And so there were lots of little stick figure drawings of sort of me [CHUCKLES] as a four-year-old. So, yeah, people still do reach out.

PHOEBE JUDGE: Why do you think his story had such an impact in Italy?

ELEANOR GREEN: Well, I think that one of the reasons the story had a big impact was just that this was something that was rare that happened there. But I think, on a bigger scale, I think that for a lot of us, myself included, we want to be people who are generous, people who are thoughtful and who give to others. We want to be people who are forgiving and gracious.

And that goes away like the minute that somebody cuts us off in traffic in the morning, [CHUCKLES] like these ideals that we have just like go away the minute things get difficult. But what my parents did was they were generous when they had lost everything. And my parents will probably say, well, anybody would make this decision. But most people in their position don't. And I think that there's something really optimistic about that that people want to believe in.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

PHOEBE JUDGE This year is the 30th anniversary of Nicholas's death. Today, five of the seven recipients of his organs are still
(AS alive. Maria Pia Pedalla, who received Nicholas's liver, is now almost 50 years old. She was in a coma at the time
NARRATOR): of the liver transplant, so she didn't know anything about Nicholas until she woke up from her transplant surgery. She told us in an email, quote, "I thought we will grow old together. And that's how it went." When she gave birth to her son, she named him Nicholas.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

PHOEBE JUDGE: *This Is Love* is created by Lauren Spohrer and me. Nadia Wilson is our senior producer. Katie Bishop is our supervising producer. Our producers are Susannah Roberson, Jackie Sojico, Lilly Clark, Lene Sillesen, and Megan Cunnane. Our show is mixed and engineered by Veronica Simonetti.

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