Donor Family Services

Transplant Recipient Stories

Upstate New York Transplant Services honors the memory of all the individuals who have left a legacy through organ and tissue donation. All donors and their families are true heroes. We send special thanks to those families who have shared their stories for this site.

Organ and tissue recipients are living proof that transplantation works. Several transplant recipients have documented their experience to help raise awareness about donation. Please click on the links below to read their stories.

If your life has been touched by organ and tissue donation and you would like to submit a testimony, please contact UNYTS' Family Services Counselor, Kim Lauta, at klauta@unyts.org.

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Lee D., Liver Transplant Recipient, 1988
Organ Transplantation: Paying It Forward

Twelve years ago, a twenty-two year old man lost his life in an automobile accident. Two months ago, a man meets his thirty-year old biological son for the first time. One month later he meets the wife and daughters of the donor who saved his life twelve years ago.

I have been greatly blessed by several extraordinarily miraculous events. A liver transplant saved my life which enabled me to continue, and most recently complete, a fifteen year search for my son who was given up for adoption thirty years ago. Then, after twelve years of anonymous correspondence, I met my donor's wife and daughters. Miracles really do happen, and dreams do come true.

Two weeks before meeting my donor family, I had the pleasure, like so many others, to see an inspiring movie called, Pay It Forward. On the surface this film seemed to deliver a fairly simple message, but upon further reflection, one realizes that this simple story presents a profoundly moving and thought-provoking concept which goes so much deeper. I instantly thought about my donor family who I was about to meet for the first time. When I left the theatre, I kept thinking about the overriding message which suggested that when someone has done a good deed for you, instead of paying that person back, it's far more meaningful to pay it forward. In other words, extend your kindness to someone else who in turn will acknowledge your kindness by helping others. That way one simple gesture will set off an eternal chain of giving.
Like so many other transplant recipients, I have wrestled with how I could ever show my gratitude to my donor and his family. How could I pay back for all I received? For the past twelve years I have devoted my time to demonstrate in a multitude of ways how grateful I am to my donor family. Throughout the years I sent numerous letters and cards expressing my appreciation. I’ve talked to countless people about the importance of organ donation, all in tribute to my donor and his family. I conscientiously maintain a healthy lifestyle and thank God for them daily. Yet, I have always felt this was not enough.

As I now reflect back on all the life altering experiences I’ve had since my transplant, meeting my son and donor family for the first time, I now clearly comprehend the message from Pay It Forward. I can never hope to recover the thirty years lost not being a father to my son. I can never find a way to make up for my donor family’s loss and repay them for their selfless act of making my second chance at life possible. For me, and all my fellow transplant recipients, paying it forward is a way of ensuring that this chain of giving to others will continue beyond the span of our lives.

In rural America a white family donates their loved one’s liver to a stranger, an urban black man...Love and compassion go on...A new beginning is made possible for a father and son...Love and compassion go on...Organ donation transcends the artificial boundaries of race, religion and nationality we often impose on each other.

We learn many valuable lessons from life’s everyday experiences. The life and love of a donor lives inside every transplant recipient. My hope is that transplant recipients will recognize the love and compassion given, and in honor of their donor and their family, they will pay it forward. Love and compassion go on and on...

Reverend Washington, Liver Transplant Recipient

In 1995 I was forced to step away from my involvement in the community and my job as an emergency medical technician as a result of a debilitating illness that destroyed my liver.

As you can imagine, this was a very difficult time for my loved ones. During this time, I received an assurance from the Lord that "it was already done." My life verse is, "But my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus." Philippians 4:9

I received a generous donation from an individual and this person's family and underwent an organ transplant. I have now regained my health and I am once again able to be active in the community. In 1998 I became Senior Pastor of the Church of God Tabernacle, and this year I took over the helm of our local civil rights/human rights organization, The Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Danea J., Kidney Recipient

When I was born my parents were told that I had hypoplastic kidneys. This meant that my kidneys would not grow with my body and one day I would outgrow them. The doctors also told them that I would need a kidney transplant when I was older.

When I was 11 years old I became increasingly sick, and had to be put on dialysis. About a year after that I was called and told that there was a kidney for me. That night was really difficult for me, because the decision I was about to make would change my life forever. I finally called the doctors back and told them that I would take the kidney. The reason I wasn't sure that I wanted it was
because my health was so good at the time that I didn’t want to take the chance of being sick again. I knew it would end up better though, so that is why I went for it.

After the surgery I felt so helpless. I still felt sick, even more than before. I was really mad that I had gotten the transplant. I felt like all the side effects were ruining my life. I just wanted things to be back to the way they were before I had my transplant. Then a while after the transplant I started to realize why the transplant was so wonderful. It was like I was given a new life. I had a new beginning and I was free from pain and sickness. For me to have gotten my kidney transplant was the best decision of my life. I am so much healthier and happier now. I feel strong and I can do a lot more than ever before.

It has been a little over five years since my transplant and I have not had one rejection episode. My life is so much more normal then I ever thought my life could be. I really don’t have any restrictions like I did while I was on dialysis. If anyone asked me what my opinion is I would 100% tell them to get a transplant. It is really hard at first, but you will soon realize how wonderful it is and how much better you feel. All the pain and problems that you go through before you have a transplant are all forgotten after you are given this new gift of life. I will be going to college in the fall and without my transplant I would not have been able to go off to college as far as I am. This decision was the most important decision of my life and I have no regrets from it. I hope that this will help you to know that there are other people who are going through the same things as you and it will be okay. Things get better, and your transplant is only the beginning of a whole new life.

Sharon & BJ: The story of the Little Kidney who could.

Once upon a time, there was a damsel in distress. She needed a new kidney. Alas, she looked and looked, but found no kidney donor. The doctors all said, "Sharon without a new kidney, you will be ill much of the time." Needing to talk to someone, she called BJ in Arizona to relay her woes. Alas, BJ is a very special lady. Not only would she give someone the shirt off her back, she would give the kidney out of her body to the sister she loves. "I will donate a healthy kidney to you, my dear sister," BJ exclaimed. She continued, "If the kidney fits, wear it in excellent health."

After months of tests, reading books, watching videos, and vampires taking gallons of blood, the moment of truth had arrived. The doctor said, "BJ pack your bags; you've won an all expense unpaid trip to New York to have a vital part of your body removed." BJ firmly said to him, "No, doctor you are wrong, my expenses are paid many times over in a benefit to be able to share my vital organs with my sister. You see, what could possibly be more valuable or rewarding than being able to save my sister's life? And, why should I not share an organ in me that God was so gracious in giving me two? As you can see, I have won."

BJ hugged her family and headed for New York with a smile in her heart. The day of surgery was cool, sunny and crisp that October 1996 day. Both BJ and Sharon, along with family prayed together that the kidney Sharon was about to receive would bring new life for her. All the tests said it would.

The hours crept by while family waited in the surgery waiting area for the good news of the girls' journey together, which BJ had entitled, "Sharing with Sharon."

Finally, out from the operating room stepped the surgeon. Perspiring and still masked, he stood in silence facing the girls' family. They could not see his expression. As he slowly untied the mask from his face, a lone tear rolled down his cheek. He said these words "The little kidney who could DID!" Everyone lived happily ever after.
Kathy, Cornea Recipient

Today is one year since my surgery. I just had to write to you today to again thank you for your decision to follow through on John’s wishes to donate his corneas. I have his picture in my office by my computer (the one with him giving the "thumbs up" while sitting on the couch), and I could cry! What a wonderful young man he was and so thoughtful to think of others at his young age! You raised a wonderful person and I know you’re so proud of him; I’m just so lucky to have a part of him with me helping give me a better life and so thankful for him making my sight so much brighter and better!

I just needed you to know today that I am so happy you and Kenny had the incredible courage to follow through on the donation at the worst time in your life! You both are absolutely amazing!! May God Bless John and give him my sincerest gratitude for what he chose to do!!

Love, Kathy