

I'm Alive Because Someone Donated

Have you talked to your family about organ donation?

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This year I have a lot to be thankful for. Six months ago I was dying of liver failure. I couldn't get up from the couch without help. Walking across the house left me completely winded. My body had accumulated 120 lbs. of fluid retention, primarily in my abdomen. I was experiencing life threatening bleeding in my esophagus as a result of my blood not being able to pass through my liver. I was struggling to think clearly as my liver no longer filtered the ammonia from my bloodstream. All potential treatment options had been exhausted. The only thing that would extend my life would be a liver transplant.

I was referred to OHSU (Oregon Health Science University) for a liver transplant evaluation. We're fortunate to have such a fine medical institution so near to our city. OHSU in unison with the Portland VAMC is one of only about 120 centers throughout the U.S. and the only facility within the state of Oregon that performs liver transplants.

The evaluation determines a candidate's suitability for transplant. It consists of a week's worth of all-encompassing medical tests evaluating all of the body's functions. Additional tests are performed to assess social and psychological readiness for such a life-altering surgery. Finally candidates are screened for alcohol, tobacco or other substance abuse issues.

A few weeks later I was added to "the list", literally a list of candidates that has been deemed medically suitable for transplant. It is prioritized by medical necessity, with the sickest of the patients being at the top of the list. Within a month I was at the top.

On June 30th, 2011 I received a call from the abdominal transplant department at OHSU. They had a liver available for me. After letting

the initial shock sink in for a few minutes, I grabbed an overnight bag and headed to the hospital with my family. Everything happened so fast. After some last minute tests and waiting I was rolled into the operating room. The next thing I knew I'm waking up in the hospital not having much memory of the last year of my life, let alone what had transpired over the past several hours.

Almost immediately I felt better. I didn't realize I could feel so great as my body had become accustomed to the

slow progression of my illness over the last 25 years. *I was now able to live again!* Since my transplant 5 months ago I have been able to do things with my family again. I was able to spend the day at the zoo with my five year old grandson. I was able to spend a week in Las Vegas with 18 fellow transplant recipients that I met on Facebook. And I've been able to return to work, go back to school and am currently preparing to launch a new business. Not a day goes by without total appreciation and amazement of the gift that I've received.

But most importantly, I realize that this gift was not a result of something I earned or necessarily deserved. Someone at some point made it known that upon their death, they would like to donate their organs in order to let someone else live. Without this selfless act of compassion I probably would not be writing this article today.

A FEW FACTS ABOUT OREGON DONATION:

About 90% of Americans say they support donation, but only 30% know the essential steps to take to be a donor. There are currently over 112,000 men, women and children in the U.S. waiting for an organ transplant. Over



Michael Antonelli (back row, far right) and 12 other transplant recipients that met online through Facebook and got together in Las Vegas.

2,700 of those live in the Pacific Northwest. An average of 18 people die each day from the lack of available organs for transplant. One person can save as many as eight lives through organ donation and improve 50 others through tissue donation. Last year alone, the lives of more than 28,000 people were saved through organ donation.

As a recipient, I have chosen to lend my voice to the increasing need for organ, eye and tissue donors. I encourage you to join me in becoming a registered donor by going to www.donatelifenw.org today. It's an easy process and only takes a moment, but it could turn into a lifetime of moments for those who wait for transplants to restore their health and mobility. And be sure to discuss your wishes with your loved ones. Marking your driver's license alone does not always guarantee participation. Your family should be aware of your wishes as well.



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Register to become an organ donor today at www.donatelifenw.org