

## **Saving a Life Through Organ Donation**

### **TSO Convention, Denton, TX June 2021**

Hello everyone,

My name is Risa McCann. This is my **dear friend and kidney sister**, Suzanne Lamb. On the screen is Kristina Ruiz-Healy, with Life Gift. We are happy to be here to share our story with you. Kristina will help us with the facts about donations and transplants and the registration process for the Gift of Life.

Suzanne and I met in 1991 when our family first moved to Kingwood. Our sons, Lance and Dustin became friends in first grade and through Cub Scouts. Through the years Suzanne and I have developed and maintained a very close and dear bond as friends or sisters by choice. We have celebrated the marriages of our children, honored the passing of our parents, we have supported each other through job changes, we've changed houses and cities, nursed each other through surgeries, and so much more.

**Suzanne**- introduce yourself; tell your health story up to Sept. 2019 when you received word that you needed a donor or dialysis

**Risa**- Let me backtrack a bit with my personal story please. In 1990 another dear friend, Leila, gave birth to a daughter, Katy, a few months before I had our son, Max. Katy was born with a horrible congenital heart defect that led to her having open heart surgery at the age of 10 days old. Her parents were not allowed to touch her until moments before her surgery for fear of overstimulation. She had multiple holes in her heart, valves in the wrong place and underdeveloped pulmonary artery. The surgery was successful to a degree. At the age of 4 she needed another surgery and she received a donor pulmonary artery. She is a vibrant healthy young woman now passionately working in the UK to develop an organ transplant network. You may watch her TED Talk and her YouTube videos later using the information I have provided on our handout. Katy's message is **"organ donation doesn't happen because someone dies, it happens because**

**someone has the courage to have that conversation.”** She advocates making the commitment to converse with your family and loved ones about your personal desires to donate your organs to others upon your passing. To quote her **“Long before we pass way we have the ability to make the decision about what our last act will be!”** She might only stand 5’2” in height but to me she is a giant in this world because she had the personal strength recently to locate and reach out to her donor family. Her donor, PJ Wolf, was an 8 year old boy who had a tragic childhood accident. He and his family had had the conversation months before he passed. Katy and her family were able to meet her donor’s family in California in 2019. Katy rode in the Parade of Roses on the Life Gift float next to a flora-graph of her donor PJ. Because of PJ’s last act she is now impacting and changing the lives of countless people all over the world.

**Suzanne-** How did you feel about seeking a donor, what were your thoughts, conversations with family?

**Risa-** I distinctly remember the conversation I had with Suzanne when she told me her doctor’s words – “donor or dialysis,” I responded with the words, “Suzanne, I am your donor.” I knew then it would be me. Of course, I then talked with my family about my decision. Bob, my sweet husband and our sons were all in favor of the donation because of their deep love for Suzanne. When someone expressed a concern or reservation I listened and addressed what they had to say. Ultimately, I knew the decision was mine (and Bob’s). Another big part of my decision was the health of my parents. During the last part of 2019 and early in 2020 as you all know the health of my parents was fading quickly. I truly felt that sharing the gift of life with Suzanne was a way to honor their lives as their life journeys were closing.

Suzanne submitted my name to her doctor as a potential donor. For the next few months I was screened as a candidate for donation at Houston Methodist Hospital J.C. Walter Transplant Center. The process began with a telephone evaluation, then a blood and urine sample. The screening progressed with more evaluations and as Suzanne promised, I learned more about my physical health and my body than I thought possible.

We both had individual transplant teams that were composed of a surgeon, a donor/recipient advocate, a caseworker, a social worker, and various other medical professions. The two teams worked separately on our cases to make sure we were strong candidates and a medical match. Let me point out at this time that I even passed the Psychiatric exam with flying colors!

**Suzanne-** talk about your journey during this time.

**Risa-** Our big day was April 30, 2020, Suzanne's mom's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. I will never forget being gowned, prepped and ready to go when Suzanne's mom was brought into my room. She told me thank you for the best birthday gift she could ever receive-life for her daughter! Our surgery was a success, obviously! We were able to see each other the next day. The day of our surgery we were the second transplant surgery of the day. The first surgery was a 72 year old man donating his kidney to his neighbor that he did not even know. She had put a sign in her yard that she needed a kidney transplant to live and he responded!

**Suzanne-** your perspective and a little about your recovery.

**Risa-** my recovery from the donation surgery was easy. I was off my feet for a few days enjoying my recliner and control of the TV remote! After that I was up and about. I have had full checkups at 6 weeks, 6 months, one and two years post-surgery. I do not take any medications, nor do I have any restrictions. My body has not responded in any way that would indicate stress or trauma as a result of the surgery. My scar is minimal. I did laugh out loud though when my surgeon told me at the 6 week visit to be sure to use a lot of sunscreen on my scar. I told him sunlight had not seen that portion of my belly since my first pregnancy!

**At this point Kristina will begin.**

## **MYTHS surrounding organ transplants**

- Organ transplant is the most federally regulated medical procedure in the United States.
- As we experienced, the donors and recipients are carefully screened and followed.
- Many times during the process it was verified and rechecked that Suzanne and her family were not paying me, providing vacations for me, or offering me promotions, etc. in exchange for the kidney.
- I have learned that drones are now being used to transport organs from donor to recipient. In Baltimore MD, April 19, 2019 a 2.8 mile journey (a 10 minute flight) was made by a washing machine sized drone-organ carrying machine. The machine transported a kidney to a 44 year old recipient. The drone was used because the street traffic would have caused the kidney to be in transit for over an hour.
- I have also learned about the Hope Act. This federal legislation allows HIV+ folds to donate and receive HIV+ kidneys and livers. In Texas, Dallas Methodist Hospital is currently the only hospital that has performed an HIV+ transplant.
- There are many myths that surround organ donation. One myth is that various religions prohibit organ donation. This myth is false. Almost all religions see donation as an altruistic selfless act that promotes life. The Seventh Day Adventist promote organ transplant but request that the blood be totally removed from the organ before the transplant.
- Another myth is that if you are recognized as a potential donor the medical team will not work to save your life. This is false. The medical team will do everything in their power to save your life. It is only after you are pronounced legally brain dead that you can be considered for organ donation. The medical team treating you is completely separate from the transplant team. The transplant team is not even called in until your family has given consent to donate.
- Some people feel that you would not be able to have an open casket if you donate your organs. Again this is a myth. Organ donation does not alter funeral arrangements or add to the costs. There is no disfigurement to the body and a normal funeral service may be held.

- There is no cost to the donor or donor family.
- Every month 300 people are added to the list of those waiting for organs. Currently there are 11,000 persons in Texas alone waiting for a transplant. Overall approximately 22 persons a day pass away waiting for a transplant.
- One person that has made the choice to donate can save up to 8 lives and change many more, by provide up to 50 transplantable organs ranging from kidney, heart, lungs and liver to corneas, skin, heart valves and tendons.
- Amazing things are being done in the world with transplants. Methodist Specialty and Transplant in San Antonio boasts the world's largest paired kidney exchange at a single hospital, a multiway swap that has included 23 recipients and donors!

### **So what can you do?**

#1. Have the conversation with your family.

#2. Register as a donor – this action takes the burden off of your family. You make the decision, you take action to register. They will not be faced with the decision at what is probably one of the worst moments of their lifetime.

#3. Advocate for organ and tissue donation via Social Media, conversations, ink pens and bumper stickers!

#4 Spend some time at the Donate Life website reading personal stories, reviewing facts, and learning more about donation.

In conclusion we would like to share some powerful words from the United Network of Organ Donation, UNOS.

“Without the organ donor, there is no story, no hope, no transplant. But when there is an organ donor, life springs from death, sorrow turns to hope, and a terrible loss becomes a gift.”