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Mother gets comfort from son's organ donation

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By John K. Ryan Staff Writer

Debra McDowell-Walker stares hard at a photo of her son, James "Boo" Bray Jr., as she fights back tears remembering the tragic day he was murdered.

Boo - shortened from his baby nickname of "Boo-Boo" - was shot and killed in his Park Forest home in the early morning hours of Jan. 24, 2007.

Bray, 27, heard someone pounding on his front door around 2:30 a.m. that January morning, she said. Several shots blasted through the front door, one hitting Bray in the arm and another in his head, according to police reports. Bray lasted another eight hours on life-sustaining machines at St. James Hospital in Olympia Fields.

"He was kept alive long enough so that his organs could be harvested," said McDowell-Walker, a registered organ donor herself. "It was so hard to say goodbye to him. I had my pastor with me to get through that. But it wasn't a hard decision to donate Boo's organs because doing so may save someone else's life."

In fact, McDowell-Walker said she was contacted a short time later by an organ donation network telling her that three people's lives were saved through the donation of four of her son's organs.

"It was an awesome feeling to hear that," McDowell-Walker said. "It took such a horrible tragedy and created something positive from it."

Andrew Austin, 22, Bray's neighbor at the time, is charged in the shooting and is due to go for a status hearing Tuesday at Markham Courthouse. An eventual conviction would be only a part of what McDowell-Walker would draw comfort from, she said. The organ donation provides the most peace of mind, she said.

"I feel Boo still lives on in some way through his donation," she said.

McDowell-Walker, of Ford Heights, has struggled with writing a letter to let the recipients know something about her son, whom she describes as liking sports and being a bright student. He was in an accelerated program at Bloom High School in Chicago Heights. "It's very hard emotionally to write that letter, but I will do it."

McDowell-Walker would love to know who the recipients are, though they are not obliged to identify themselves. "If not, I'd still have peace in knowing he saved lives," she said.

Angelique Marseille, a Homewood resident and director of the South Suburban Task Force for Organ and Tissue Donation, believes stories such as McDowell-Walker's can turn people around to look at organ donation from a different angle.

"Rather than think about their fears concerning donating organs, they can see how it helps the recipient as well as the donor's family. Donating means life goes on for so many others," Marseille said.

Carolyn Vazquez, community affairs specialist with Gift of Hope, a parent organization of the task force, is hoping to stress the importance of donations from members of minorities as National Minority Donor Awareness Day approaches Saturday.

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Finding donors among minorities is especially challenging, Vazquez said. She uses as an example the huge disparity in the number of blacks in need of a kidney donation and the number of donations received from blacks.

Vazquez attributed the low number to such issues as a general distrust of the medical system by blacks. "Many believe doctors won't try as hard to save someone who is an organ donor," she said. "This Saturday is an effort to raise awareness of the true situation and dispel such myths. People hesitate because they think they're too old or eat or drink too much. That may not be the case at all. We allow medical professionals to make that decision. We encourage everyone to look into donating organs and tissues to help others to live."

Those looking to register as an organ or tissue donor can do so at www.donatelifellinois.org. Anyone who registered before Jan. 1, 2006, is asked to re-register at the Web site.

Homewood loves hot dogs

It may have been the gorgeous weather Monday, or an economy that has people looking for a moderately priced lunch. Or, it may just have been because people love hot dogs. Whatever the reason, they were out in droves at lunchtime Monday at Irwin Park to join in the second annual Hot Dog Day put on by the Homewood-Flossmoor Park District. The event coincides with National Hot Dog Day.

The park district sold nearly 800 hot dogs in a two-hour span, topping last year's sales by nearly 200 hot dogs, said LeeAnn Fisk, recreation supervisor for the park district. "We had to go back to Walt's (Food Centers) for 100 more hot dogs when we started running out," Fisk said. Walt's donated the first 700 hot dogs for the event.

Customers paid a mere 25 cents per hot dog, or \$1 for a hot dog, bag of chips, and soft drink or water. The Banjo Buddies entertained the crowd that Fisk described as "everyone from little guys to seniors. I saw several in suits there too, which showed many local business people came for their lunch hour. With the music, it was like a picnic in the middle of the day." She estimated 400 to 500 people attended.

For those who missed this year's Hot Dog Day, the park district already is planning next year's from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. July 19 at Irwin Park.

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