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Health Matters

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By Emily Udell

Joe Mayer has the goals of a typical teenager. He wants to apply to college, play paintball with his friends and run a 5K marathon next year.

But the 19-year-old's modest plans would have been out of reach two months ago when he still was waiting for a double lung transplant.

"When I was on oxygen, I was unable to walk up the stairs," said Mayer, who ranks DePaul University and the University of Illinois among his top choices. "College would have been impossible."

On Sept. 6, the New Lenox teen underwent surgery to replace his lungs, which were damaged by cystic fibrosis, a genetic disease that causes the lungs to fill with a sticky mucus and interferes with the body's digestive process.

And he now can do something he doesn't remember doing in a long time: take a clear, deep breath.

"I missed most of high school, and I wasn't able to do the social stuff," he said. "That's what I'm most excited to for - to get on with my life and make up for lost time."

More than 4,700 people in Illinois still are on the organ transplant waiting list, according to the Gift of Hope Organ & Tissue Donor Network.

In January 2006, Illinois started a "registry of consent" to replace the old "registry of intent," and advocates are trying to raise awareness about the new database. People who are on the old list need to re-register. The new database, which is managed by the secretary of state's office, already has 2.7 million names on it, but it's still a far cry from the 6 million on the old list.

I have always just signed the back of my Illinois driver's license and assumed it was enough for organ donation, but that form of registration requires additional consent at the time of death. And it's a hard decision for grieving families to make.

"The challenge is that people think they've already done what they have to do," Gift of Hope spokesman Dave Bosch said.

But about 20 percent of families decide not to go forward with organ donation even when the deceased signed up on the old list, and this statistic was part of the impetus for creating a new registry that does not require additional consent, he said.

By April, the organization hopes to have 3.5 million names on the new list.

Catherine Simmons, who was featured on a Gift of Hope commercial last year with Mayer, still is waiting for a kidney transplant.

"I am still able to do the great majority of what I want to do. You learn your dos and don'ts," the 53-year-old Tinley Park resident said.

Simmons works full time as a home care nurse, spends time with her grandchildren, works toward completing her bachelor's degree and undergoes dialysis four times a day at home.

She had a transplant in 1999 but had a negative reaction to drugs she was taking to prevent rejection. Doctors removed the kidney about two years ago, and Simmons went back on the list.

"I'm very prayerful that I will get another kidney," she said.

It takes only a few minutes to sign up on the Donate Life Illinois Web site at www.gifttohope.org - all you need is your driver's license or state ID number.

In the words of Simmons, who is waiting for her phone to ring with news that a kidney has been found for her: "I think that is one of the most noble, humanitarian contributions that a person can make."

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