

The Fox Valley Villages Sun

LIFESTYLES

Organ Recipient: "This is a cause that saves lives"

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By Linda Girardi special to the beacon news

Alecia McClung is a living testament to the thousands of Illinoisans waiting for lifesaving organ transplants.

The 45-year-old Aurora woman has taken her passion for speaking about her experience as a kidney and pancreas transplant recipient to 30-second television and radio advertisements as part of the Donate Life Illinois campaign to spread the word about the importance of joining Illinois' new organ and tissue donor registry.

"I decided to turn my pain into power," McClung said.

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Alecia McClung (left) supports Penny Bady while Bady speaks of her son's death during the pair's presentation Saturday at Loyola University Medical Center in Maywood. McClung's life was saved when she received a organ transplant from Bady's son. The two women are now close friends.

photos by Tyler Stoffel/Special to the beacon News

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At left, McClung and Bady have breakfast before giving a presentation Saturday at the Stritch Medical School at Loyola.

Learn more on the Web

lamAreYou.org is the official campaign Web site for the organ donation registry. The commercial featuring Alecia McClung can be viewed at lifegoeson.com.

During National Donate Life Month in April, Donate Life Illinois and Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White are encouraging people to register as organ and tissue donors.

McClung is featured in a commercial asking people, "Will you help?" White's office is trying to publicize a change in donor registration that replaces the old method of signing the back of your driver's license.

McClung's story

Today, McClung is a vibrant woman enjoying life with husband Bill and three sons, Billy, 16; Brennan, 14; and Blake, 7 in the White Eagle subdivision of Aurora.

But years ago, McClung, diagnosed with juvenile diabetes, developed kidney disease when she contracted viral pneumonia while pregnant with her first child. In her late 20s, the illness almost killed McClung and her baby. At one point, her organs began to fail, and doctors recommended an emergency Caesarian section as the best chance of survival for mother and baby. The life-and-death decision was left to her husband, Bill. After prayer, McClung said her husband chose to listen to an inner voice from God telling him to wait. Two days later, on Mother's Day, she gave birth to their eldest son.

By the birth of her third son, her health continued to deteriorate, ultimately leaving her on the organ transplant waiting list for 19 months. The night of Dec. 13, 2003, she received a call telling her a kidney match had been found. Early the next morning, she underwent surgery at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago. Her donor was a 15-year old boy.

Met donor's mother

McClung began attending meetings of Organ Transplant Support, Inc., a Naperville-based group comprised of organ recipients and patients still waiting. A year later, she met Penny Bady, the mother of the boy from whom McClung received her kidney. Bady's son, Maurice Brown Jr. was the victim of a drive-by-shooting on his 15th birthday while on his way to basketball practice.

Bady, who works in the Northwestern Hospital organ transplant division -- the very hospital where McClung underwent the operations -- said she never imagined having to make the decision to donate her son's organs.

"Alecia receiving my son's kidney was the best thing -- it could not have happened to a nicer person. Each year she attends my son's memorial service," Bady said.

Together they make appearances to speak about the need for organ donation.

"We consider ourselves spiritual soul sisters," Bady said.

In October 2006, McClung underwent another organ transplant surgery, this time receiving a new pancreas.

"I feel amazing," McClung said, adding her children have seen her progression from a sick mom to a healthy mom.

"This is a cause that saves lives. One organ donor can save the lives of 50 to 60 people," McClung said. "If all this didn't happen to me, I probably would not have thought twice about it."

Speaking out

McClung has taken her message in the last three years to as many as 20 public schools, colleges and dozens of driver's license facilities and hospitals.

"God doesn't see race, color, age or gender. The commercial's message is: It doesn't matter -- the only thing that matters is will you help? I feel a need to speak out about it.

"I hope people will see it's the right thing to do and re-register in the new registry," McClung said.

Donate Life Illinois is a coalition of donation-related agencies leading an 18-month campaign to register 3.5 million Illinoisans in the new organ and tissue donor registry by April 2008. The campaign is part of a national effort through Donate Life America to increase to 100 million the number of Americans who have designated donation decisions.

The campaign's Dave Bosch said most Illinois residents are still unaware of the new registry and the fact that anyone who signed up to be a donor prior to Jan. 1, 2006 needs to re-register. Signing the back of your license no longer makes you a donor in Illinois.

Under Illinois' previous "donor intent" registry, additional consent was required from family members or other legal authority for donation to take place. Potential donors' wishes were overridden nearly 20 percent of the time, he said.

Donors need to join the new donor registry by visiting the Donate Life Illinois campaign site at www.IamAreYou.org; visiting any Illinois state driver's license facility; or by calling the Illinois Secretary of State Organ/Tissue Donor Program at (800) 210-2106.

"I hope people will see the commercial and decide to register as living or non-living donors to save people's lives. I would have been dead without my donors," McClung said.