

# Morton Times-News

Wednesday, May 2, 2007

## Morton girl appears in Donate Life commercial

By Christina Smith

TimesNewspapers

With April being Donate Life month and more than 4,600 people on the Illinois organ transplant list, an 18-month campaign has already started to get at least 3.5 million Illinois residents to join the organ donation registry.

In Morton, one 10-year-old girl and her family members are getting involved.

Erin Fitzgerald was 18 months old when she received a kidney transplant Dec. 29, 1997.

At the time, she was the youngest person to receive a kidney at OSF Saint Francis Hospital in Peoria.

"She was diagnosed as dysplastic and we were told she would have to be on dialysis after her transplant," Pat Fitzgerald, Erin's father, said.

Jamie Fitzgerald, Erin's mother, added that Erin's kidneys were not completely formed and did not have much function when she was born.

After the surgery, Erin did not have to go on dialysis because her kidneys started working properly and her body accepted the new kidney.

"She just got really lucky," Fitzgerald said.

If Erin continues to have 10 percent kidney function in one of her kidneys, she will not have to be put on dialysis.

Fitzgerald, who gave his kidney to Erin, added she has labs

done every month to track her creatine-level, which measures how her kidney is doing.

Erin is also on medication for rejection and high blood pressure, most of which she will always have to take.

"The meds slowly make the body reject the kidney, and she will have to have another transplant at some point. It will be 10 years in December since her surgery, and the average life span for an organ is nine or 10 years," Fitzgerald said.

In the last two years, Erin's face and name have become a part of the organ donation campaign, called "Donate for Life."

Erin went to Chicago on March 10 to be in a new commercial for the campaign.

"I think it is a good way to get others to join," Erin said.

Before Jan. 1, 2006, if an organ donor died, state law required hospitals to ask family members for permission to harvest the individual's organs.

A new law, which went into effect Jan. 1, 2006, created a new organ donor registry for individuals to give their organs without parental or family permission.

Since the new registry does not include anyone who signed up as an organ donor prior to 2006, those individuals have to register for the new organ donor list.

Most people who have an organ transplant are able to live



Christina Smith / MortonTimes-News

**Spokeswoman:** Erin Fitzgerald, 10, of Morton, smiles for a photo with her dog, Lucky. Fitzgerald received a kidney transplant when she was 18 months old. In March, she went to Chicago to be in a commercial for the Donate Life Campaign, whose goal is to get 3.5 million Illinois residents to join the new state organ donor registry list.

a normal life, Fitzgerald said.

In Erin's case, she has been able to participate in soccer and basketball, along with taking guitar lessons.

Throughout the year, the Fitzgerald family volunteers at organ donation booths, that

help inform people of the need for organ donors.

One donor can help more than 25 people.

Every 13 minutes, a new person is added to the national organ transplant waiting list.

Each year, nearly 300 people waiting for organ transplants at Illinois centers die while waiting.

For information about volunteering or becoming an organ donor, visit [www.IamAreYou.org](http://www.IamAreYou.org) or [www.lifegoeson.com](http://www.lifegoeson.com).



Christina Smith / MortonTimes-News

**Future rock star?:** Erin Fitzgerald, 10, shows off her electric guitar. Besides taking guitar lessons, she also plays basketball and soccer. Fitzgerald is in a commercial encouraging Illinois residents to become organ donors and join the new state registry, which allows hospitals to harvest an individual's organs without permission from family members.