

LOCAL

Organ donation brings good out of tragedy

When Jodi Retzlaff signed up for the organ donor registry while renewing her driver's license this month, she probably did not expect that her organs would save two lives 10 days later.

The 23-year-old Crystal Lake woman died April 18 after a multiple-vehicle accident in Fox River Grove. But because she had signed up to be an organ donor, a 12-year-old boy now has her heart and a 60-year-old woman has her liver.

"The only thing keeping me together right now is knowing that two people are living right now because of her," Retzlaff's mother, Diana Kudsk of Cary, said through tears. "Bits of her are living on."

Retzlaff was able to give in death what a growing number of patients need to live: More than 4,750 people were on the organ transplant waiting list in Illinois as of Friday. That number is higher than it has ever been, said Kim McCullough, spokeswoman for Gift of Hope Organ & Tissue Network, which coordinates organ donations in most of Illinois and northwest Indiana.

Demand for organs is growing

"I think what we're seeing over the last five or 10 years is that obviously people are living longer," McCullough said. "For many people who begin to experience organ failure, transplantation is a viable option for them."

An increase in cases of diabetes, hypertension and other diseases that lead to kidney failure also are adding to the growing waiting lists for organs, McCullough said.

Finally, medical advances and better drugs are making transplants an option for more people, she said.

In 2006, 305 people donated one or more of their organs after death, and 996 donated tissue such as corneas, heart valves, skin and bone.

A life cut short

Retzlaff had been earning credits toward an accounting degree at McHenry County College and working as a manager at Culver's in Island Lake before she died, Kudsk said.

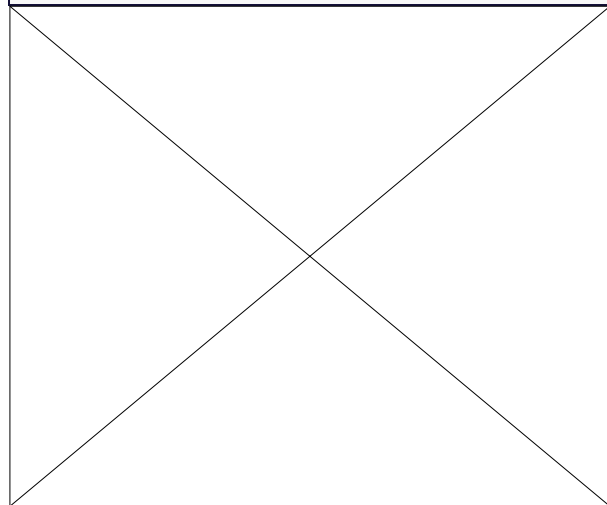
"She was smart as a whip," Kudsk said. "She wanted nothing more than to go to school and get her degree."

The family set up a scholarship fund in Retzlaff's name at McHenry County College, Kudsk said.

Retzlaff died in the hospital April 18 after her Honda Civic was struck the day before on Route 14 in Fox



Trent Kudsk (from left), 6, Garrett Kudsk, 9, Paige Retzlaff, 16, and Rachael Retzlaff, 21, siblings, and Diana Kudsk, mother of Jodi Retzlaff, 23, who was killed in a multi-vehicle accident in Fox River Grove last week, hold Jodi's dog, Diamond. (Photo Provided by Family)



River Grove by three other vehicles, including a semi-truck.

The investigation is ongoing, Fox River Grove Police Chief Robert Polston said Friday.

Thomas Dubnick, the driver of the first vehicle to hit Retzlaff's car, was charged with improper lane use, said Lt. Ron Lukasik of the Fox River Grove Police.

Only a week after the accident, Retzlaff's parents, four siblings and friends were struggling to adjust to life without her.

"It's been the worst experience of my life," Kudsk said.

Retzlaff's 21-year-old sister, Rachel Retzlaff, had been planning to move in with her sister after graduating from Regis University in Denver later this week. She was going through her sister's clothes on Friday, she said.

"She always said, 'I never have anything to wear,'" Rachel Retzlaff said of her sister. "And yet I just packed up six boxes of clothes."

Rachel Retzlaff said her older sister was a "girly girl."

"We always used to do each other's hair," she said. "When we were really young we used to dress up and put makeup on each other."

The two siblings were very close and liked to reminisce about making up dances when they were in middle school, Rachel Retzlaff said.

Kudsk said Jodi Retzlaff's youngest siblings were having a harder time understanding what had happened.

The transplant process

Organ transplants must happen within 36 hours of a donor's death, McCullough said.

After Gift of Hope representatives determine that a person's organs are healthy enough to be donated, they check the donor registry to see whether that person is listed. If not, they ask the family for their consent. They keep the family informed throughout the process, McCullough said.

For Kudsk, who is a nurse at Northern Illinois Medical Center, organ donation was not a new concept.

"My husband's aunt is a double liver transplant recipient, so we've always talked about it," Kudsk said. "... It is what [Retzlaff] wanted as well as what we wanted.

"... I just want people to know that some good came out of this."

COMMENTS

The following are comments from the readers. In no way do they represent the view of NWHerald.com or Shaw Newspapers.

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Wren wrote on **April 29, 2007 6:47 AM**: "I'm so sorry for your loss. I hope that your daughters gift will be an inspiration to others to sign up for the organ donation program. It has to be a comfort to know that a loving giving person in life continues to give after such a tragedy. May your family continue to find comfort and blessings."

bethy1073 wrote on **April 29, 2007 7:48 AM**: "My condolences go out to your entire family. Your daughter has given a wonderful gift to those organ recipients and their families. By her signing up for the organ donor registry she has affected quite a few people in a positive way and I'm sure those families are very thankful for what she has done. My sister in-law had a kidney transplant almost a year ago and I can't even begin to tell you how thankful she is for people like your

daughter who take the time to get on the organ donor registry. I encourage people to get on the organ donor registry list, because that decision can make a difference in a lot of people's lives."

donatelif wrote on **April 29, 2007 8:20 AM**: "My condolences as well, this is such a tragic story, my thoughts are with you all in this difficult time. Jodi's selfless act as an organ donor is a testament to the power of the process and the incredible impact donors can have in helping save other peoples' lives. Many Illinois residents are still unaware of the state's new donor registry and the need to RE-REGISTER post Jan. 1, 2006 to join the new registry. Signing the back of your driver's license is no longer adequate. You can quickly re-register online by visiting www.IAmAreYou.org. It only takes a few seconds to re-register, but it may mean all the time in the world for someone waiting for a lifesaving transplant."

nonsense wrote on **April 29, 2007 1:49 PM**: "I am so sorry for your loss..Jodi was a great person and will be missed. YOur family and Jodi are in my prayers!"