



ORLAND PARK :: HOMER GLEN ::

Olympics more than just games, but a matter of life

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By Jodi Marneris

Baltimore may be home to the swimmer who beat the odds in this year's Olympics, but Orland Park is home to an Olympic swimmer who beat the odds in life.

Janice Gill's recent return flight wasn't from Beijing, but rather Pittsburgh's Carnegie Mellon University, site of the 2008 National Kidney Foundation Transplant Games.

While she is proud of earning nine medals after competing in seven U.S. Olympics and World Games over the past 14 years, the emotion at the forefront is more that of gratitude. The recipients of her appreciation include supportive family and friends, a team of caring and knowledgeable medical experts and the Gift of Hope organization.

Topping the list, however, is a family she doesn't know; a family from Oklahoma who in 1995 tragically lost their 12-year-old daughter in an accident and courageously made the decision to donate her organs.

"I was resigned to the fact that I was going to have to undergo dialysis," Janice said. "At 2:29 p.m. the day before I was to start dialysis, my pager went off. I called back to Northwestern (Memorial Hospital) and they told me they had a kidney for me. I never expected it to happen. It was my dream."

Janice suffered from polycystic disease, a progressive, genetic disorder of the kidneys. The disease also affected her mother, Joan, who received a transplant in 1988 and a few years ago passed away, and her sister, JoAnn, who received a transplant in 2004, from their oldest sister, Suzanne.

Cheering on the Gill girls at this year's U.S. Transplant Games, were Suzanne, their father, John, who also lives in Orland Park, and Janice's 'nephew' Bobby Wesley, who lives just outside of Atlanta. Janice earned two silver medals and JoAnn earned a gold medal and a bronze. "My dad and sister presented our medals. It was very emotional and we were all crying," Janice said.

"These medals mean a lot to me, but I was also very proud when I competed in my first games. They were in Australia. I finished last, but I finished," Janice said. "You know, it's not the people who win the medals that the people cheer for the loudest. It's the ones who are struggling and in last place. That's who the crowd cheers for the most. I know; I've been there." She said this year's games concluded with a 15-minute standing ovation once the last athlete completed the race.

Every two years, the athletes who are all organ recipients, compete in the United States and in alternate years compete in the World Games. The people in the stands, among them family, friends, living donors and donor families, cheer on all 1,200 athletes, knowing the challenges each has faced to reach this point in their lives.

Janice will tell you the struggles are many, but, without the donors they would not be here to participate in the games or in life. "Anytime I meet a donor family I thank them whether I know them or not," said Janice, who received her kidney through the Gift of Hope, a procurement center that oversees donors and transplants in Illinois. "I've written several letters to my donor family (sent via the Gift of Hope). I've never heard from them, but I would love to."

Janice and her family are proof that donors not only save lives - they give life. An enormous advocate, she urges people to consider organ donation and register (www.giftofhope.org) their wishes, noting it is no longer adequate in Illinois to just sign the back of your driver's license.

"I have been given so much, especially from this family who lost their daughter. This is why I do so much in return," Janice said. "It's like I have a whole new life, so this year on my birthday I say I'm 25."

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