



Morton girl in commercial

She touts state's organ donation program after receiving a kidney almost 10 years ago

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BY STEVE STEIN

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MORTON - Erin Fitzgerald made history nearly 10 years ago. On Dec. 29, 1997, she became the youngest kidney transplant recipient at Children's Hospital of Illinois at OSF Saint Francis Medical Center in Peoria. She was 18 months old.

Now Erin has made a television commercial. The Morton youngster is one of nine Illinois residents, mostly transplant recipients, featured in an Illinois Secretary of State's Office commercial touting the importance of registering to be an organ and tissue donor.

In the black-and-white commercial, shot at a downtown Chicago studio in March, Erin is shown in two scenes saying, "It doesn't matter who you are," and waving with her thumb touching her nose.

"They asked me to do something funny, so that's what I did," Erin said about her wave.

Erin survived two rounds of eliminations to get into the commercial. She was asked to come to Chicago after her parents submitted her photo, and she competed against several others for airtime. Not everyone who went to Chicago made it into the commercial.

Surviving is something Erin has done quite well. After receiving a kidney from her father, Patrick Fitzgerald, Erin underwent three more surgeries in the next year. Two operations were done to clear bowel obstructions.

Erin is now an active 10-year-old who loves to play basketball and soccer, and swim. She's competed in the National Kidney Foundation's U.S. Transplant Games three times, winning seven medals, six of them gold, in her age group.

Last year in Louisville, Ky., Erin won gold medals in the 15-meter dash and long jump in track, 25-meter freestyle in swimming and softball throw. She also competed in Orlando, Fla., in 2002 and Minneapolis in 2004. The 2008 Transplant Games will be in Pittsburgh.

"Erin has gone from being a sick little baby to a young girl leading a normal, healthy life," said Jamie Fitzgerald, her mother. "It's been an amazing transformation."

Other than taking nine medications and being short for her age, there isn't much that separates Erin from her fifth-grade classmates at Grundy Elementary School or her brother, Ryan Fitzgerald, 12, a seventh-grader at Morton Junior High School. Erin is 4 feet, 2 1/2 inches tall and weighs 59 pounds.

"Erin is small but mighty," her mother said.

Patrick is doing well, too, even though he still has the scars from the 15 staples inserted in his left side after his kidney was removed.

"These days, the surgery for a kidney donor is much less invasive," Patrick said. "It's a laproscopic procedure. All you have afterwards are a couple of one-inch scars."

Erin was born with multicystic dysplastic kidneys, a defect that occurs in one in 4,300 live births. Both of her kidneys were removed.

The commercial Erin appears in is part of the Donate Life Illinois campaign launched in January. The campaign's goal is to register 3.5 million residents in the state's new organ and tissue donor registry by April 2008.

Donate Life Illinois is a coalition of donation-related agencies. Patrick and Jamie Fitzgerald are volunteers with the coalition. That's how Erin got a chance to be in the commercial.

Illinois residents who signed up in the state's organ and tissue donor registry prior to Jan. 1, 2006, are being asked to re-register because of a change in state law.

In the state's previous "donor intent" registry, additional consent is required from family members or other legal authorities for end-of-life donation to take place.

Under that system, potential donors' wishes were overridden nearly 20 percent of the time.

With the new "first person consent" registry, a person's end-of-life wishes to donate cannot be overridden. Nearly two million residents have joined the new registry. There are six million residents in the old registry, which remains intact.

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COMMENTS:

Subject: Take action to save lives today!

Erin's story is truly a testament to the power of organ donation. Sadly, there are still 4,700 Illinoisans and over 96,000 people nationwide awaiting lifesaving transplants.

Many Illinois residents are unaware that signing the back of your driver's license is no longer adequate to be an organ donor in Illinois and as mentioned above, you need to **RE-REGISTER** post Jan. 1, 2006 to join the state's new organ/tissue donor registry.

Illinois residents can quickly register online by visitng www.IAmAreYou.org, where you can also join our online community of supporters in helping spread the word about the need to re-register.

-Scott M.

Donate Life Illinois – Campaign Manager