

## **Bloomington woman, 21, donated kidney to someone she didn't know**

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BLOOMINGTON -- Amanda Gedraitis has a tattoo of a kidney on her side to celebrate the kidney she donated.

"I called my kidney Pedro," she said, smiling and pointing out the tattoo.

Then Amanda, who turned 25 on Jan. 2, lifted her sweater to show a three-inch incision below her navel where her kidney was removed. On either side of the incision are tattoos of Jay Gordon, a singer with the rock band Orgy.

"I asked them to do this (vertical) incision so they wouldn't decapitate Jay," she said.

Meet Amanda Gedraitis -- Bloomington resident, Illinois State University student and perhaps the most casual and thoughtful organ donor you'll ever meet.

But what makes her unique is that she apparently is the youngest person in Illinois -- and among the younger people nationwide -- to have donated an organ without knowing the recipient, according to the nationwide United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS) and the Illinois-based Gift of Hope Tissue & Organ Donor Network.

When Amanda donated one of her kidneys on Dec. 16, 2005, she was 21 years old and she did it because it was the right thing to do, even though she didn't know who would be getting her kidney.

Nearly all living donors know who will be getting their organ because it's usually a relative. The youngest anonymous donor nationwide was 19, UNOS said.

After Amanda donated her kidney at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago, she was told



Amanda Gedraitis, 25, shows her tattoo celebrating the kidney she donated in December 2005. She named the kidney Pedro. Gedraitis is the youngest person in Illinois to have donated an organ without knowing the recipient. (The Pantagraph/STEVE SMEDLEY)

she may have been the youngest anonymous donor but she didn't think anything more of it until recently. That was when Gift of Hope became aware of the significance of her gift.

Gift of Hope is an organ procurement organization that works with donations made after people have died, explained communications director Dave Bosch.

After Gift of Hope became aware of Amanda's accomplishment last fall -- when she got involved in organ donation awareness volunteer work on the ISU campus -- the organization began to include the ISU junior in its efforts to get more college-age students to register to be organ donors.

"I'm pretty amazed by her," Bosch said.

Bosch said Gift of Hope isn't using Amanda's story to encourage people to be anonymous living donors because of the inherent risks involved. Instead, the organization is using her story to encourage people to register to become donors after their death.

"After hearing about what Amanda did as a living donor, how could you not want to register to be an organ donor?" Bosch said.

Amanda agreed to tell her story only because she hopes it will encourage more people to register.

"Most days, I don't even think about being a kidney donor," she said in her apartment on Bloomington's southwest side. "For me, it was the right thing to do. I was able to improve the quality of someone's life."

"She donated a kidney to a total stranger and hasn't bragged about it for more than three years," her brother, David Gedraitis, who will turn 24 Wednesday, said from his home in Moline.

Amanda and David grew up in LaSalle with their mother and grandparents. Amanda admits to being a tomboy whose childhood adventures included doing gymnastics over a bush in her front yard -- a move that resulted in multiple knee surgeries.

She learned about taking care of people and about business from working in her grandparents' ice cream parlors -- Twisty Freeze in LaSalle and Twisty II in Peru.

"I worked there pretty much as soon as I could reach the counter until we handed over the keys (sold the business) four years ago," she said. She did everything from waiting on customers to helping with payroll, hiring and scheduling.

Amanda learned that in a small business, you had to solve problems yourself.

She also grew up with a great empathy for other people and for animals.

"Ever since I was a little kid, anything I could rescue or catch was my pet," she said.

She volunteered for years at Illinois Valley Animal Rescue in LaSalle and volunteered at Heritage Manor nursing home in Peru until it became too hard for her when residents she befriended died. When she was a college student and residents' adviser at Loyola University in Chicago, she cut her hair and dyed it different colors to raise money for a freshman battling ovarian cancer.

"She always liked to be different," said her brother, a mechanical engineering contractor at the Rock Island Arsenal. "She never really cared what other people thought. Her attitude has been 'Don't follow the status quo when the status quo doesn't make sense to you. Do what needs to be done.'"

Amanda was 18 when she first read about living organ donations. She was intrigued. Over the next two years, she did more research. She was disturbed by the idea of dying people waiting for an organ because not enough people register to be donors. She was drawn to the idea that she could help by donating a kidney ("I only need one") and her surgeries over the years meant that she wasn't squeamish.

"I thought 'What if my grandpa needed a transplant? My grandma? My mom? My brother?'"

Amanda determined that Northwestern was the best hospital for the transplant.

When she was 20, Amanda was taking a break from college and working full time at Target in LaSalle when she decided it was time. She began a nine-month process of health exams, blood tests, tissue typing, computed tomography scans, chest X-rays, urinalyses and all sorts of interviews that concluded that she was fit, healthy and ready to be an organ donor.

Her mother and grandparents were worried and didn't support her decision. Her brother was concerned until he talked with Amanda and found she had done her homework and was ready.

"I thought what she was doing was awesome," David said.

The transplant went off without a hitch. By 5 p.m. that day, she was walking laps around the hospital and was home by noon Dec. 17, one day after the surgery. She was back volunteering at the animal shelter within three days, back working at Target in three weeks and felt back to normal within two months.

Three days after surgery, she was in the waiting room at Northwestern for a follow-up appointment. She knew her kidney recipient also was there. She looked around the room, felt a "weird connection" with a middle-age woman in a wheelchair, walked up to her and said, "Did you have surgery on Friday? Did you get a kidney?"

"Her mom burst into tears and pseudo-tackled me and thanked me," Amanda recalled.

She found out the woman was a Chicago schoolteacher who also writes children's books.

"It was obvious that she had been in desperate need," Amanda recalled. "Then she said, 'I want to

show you something,' and she rose up and walked into her doctor's appointment." She hadn't been able to walk in a long time.

A year later, Amanda asked about the woman at Northwestern and was told she was doing better than ever. Amanda made it clear to the transplant center staff that it would be OK with her if the woman wanted to keep in touch but she hasn't.

"I'm fine with it," she said. "We both had lives to go back to."

Amanda began at ISU in the fall, majoring in philosophy. She hopes to go to law school and specialize in human or animal rights cases.

"The lesson of Amanda's story," said her brother, David, "is that we all have the capacity to do extraordinary things. We just need to go out and do them."

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