



Organ donors and recipients celebrate gifts of life

April 14, 2009
By Jeff Manes

Post-Tribune correspondent

CROWN POINT -- The atmosphere was filled with love recently as more than 50 people observed National Donate Life Month at Saint Anthony Medical Center.

"What you see here are people who have actually been touched by donation because their loved one was a donor or they've been a recipient," said Alice Jenkins of Munster, the Lake County hospital development representative for Gift of Hope, an organ procurement organization.

"Sometimes we don't realize how many lives have been touched by donation until they're all in a room together like today. When I do presentations, I'll ask, 'How many have a personal story about donation?' I'm amazed at the number of hands that go up. 'My uncle, my aunt, my sister, my brother ...' "

Crown Point's David Ruskowski, president of Saint Anthony Medical Center, told the audience more than 100,000 people nationwide are waiting for lifesaving organ transplants and another person is added to the waiting list every 13 minutes; an average of 18 people die every day while waiting.

He said one organ, eye and tissue donor can save or enhance the lives of more than 25 people.

Saint Anthony Medical Center has had an organ donation committee for four years and has observed April as Organ Donor Month in the past, but not with such magnitude.

"This is the first time we received the flag," the Rev. Tony Janik said. "Our committee meets monthly to look at the areas where we need to encourage donation. We also look at how we can better serve and minister families at the time of donations."

A poem entitled "Solar Eyes" and a portrait were on display; both were the work of Rhonda Remesnik of Lake Village in memory of her friend Jennifer Hayes, who was killed in an automobile accident. Two people can see today thanks to Hayes' donation.

Also displayed was a quilt honoring donors past, an opportunity made possible by the not-for-profit Indiana Organ Procurement Organization.

"My husband is on the quilt," Veronica Farrell of Lowell said. "It was a shock to us when John got sick; he was a health nut. On Aug. 5, 2005, he was told he had Stage 4 cancer; he passed away two months later. The only things 'Papa' John was allowed to donate were his eyes because of the cancer."

People of all ages and medical histories are encouraged to consider themselves as potential donors. Medical condition at the time of death determines what organs and tissue can be donated.

Merrillville's Ed Jagiela is the organizer of New Beginnings Organ and Transplant Support Group, which meets the third Wednesday of every month at St. Mary Medical Center in Hobart.

For six months, Jagiela was totally blind, but he has had vision for the past eight years thanks to a 7-year-old girl from California.

"We are one big family trying to help each other through each individual's crisis," Jagiela said.

Earleen Stephens of Lowell is a supervisor of food and nutritional services at Saint Anthony Medical Center; she also is an organ donor.

"My oldest brother was in Vietnam in 1967 and '68," Stephens said. "When he came home, he started getting sick; they attributed it to the Agent Orange. By 1997, he only had 6 percent of his kidney function left. They had to put him on dialysis.

"I'm one of 14 children; all of us got checked out. Six of us matched; three were perfect matches. I told my brother and sister it would be best if it was me. My brother needing the kidney was quite grateful. He has had my kidney for 12 years now; he's doing wonderful."

Stephens gave the gift of life; Linda Ramos of Schererville received it.

"Six years ago, I received a pancreas," recalled Ramos. "I was a type-one juvenile diabetic for 19 years. I was told I'd be a good candidate for the surgery; I waited two years.

"Today, we're able to mingle with people who have donated their organs and they get to meet us as recipients - it's a very emotional day."