

## Transplant recipient eyes more donors

Knox junior leads intercollegiate organ and tissue donor registry

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GALESBURG —

All too familiar with the many difficulties facing someone in need of an organ or tissue transplant, Knox College junior Jackie Stillmaker is working to make the lives of those in need a little easier.

Ever since her three different corneal transplants, Stillmaker has done her best to raise awareness and support for the many needs of organ and tissue recipients. Her latest endeavor is heading up Knox College's role in the Donate Life Illinois 2008 Campus Challenge, an intercollegiate competition to register new organ and tissue donors.

When she was 14, Stillmaker developed an eye infection due to swimming while wearing contact lenses. Complications with this infection and the powerful medicines used to treat it left Stillmaker with an epithelial defect in her left eye, which causes a thinning of the cornea.

Due to the epithelial defect her cornea was perforated, requiring her to get an emergency transplant or permanently lose vision in that eye. This happened twice more, requiring Stillmaker to undergo three corneal transplants.

Stillmaker's battle with her eye infection and ensuing complications dominated her high school years, starting with the very first day of high school.

"My first day of school I had to go to the nurse to get special permission to take my eye drops in class," said Stillmaker. "I was on the traveling basketball team coming into high school and I could still play wearing protective goggles, but without depth perception or peripheral vision."

As her condition worsened and she needed the corneal transplants, she could no longer play on the

basketball team and spent more and more days out of school for medical reasons, missing a total of 58 days of her sophomore year.

Stillmaker's medical challenges were not limited to her eye, as by her senior year, the powerful steroid regimen she had been on caused her to develop avascular necrosis, which causes the death of bone tissue, in her joints. This left her confined to a wheelchair for six weeks of her senior year.

Accompanying Stillmaker every step of the way was her mother, Mary Beth Stillmaker, who spent almost all of her time during this period helping her daughter and researching everything about her ailments.

"My husband lost his wife and my other children lost their mom," said Mary Beth Stillmaker. "It was just Jackie, me, and her doctors."

Despite her many hardships, Stillmaker continued to persevere and maintain a positive attitude towards her recovery.

"What am I going to do, crawl in a hole?" said Stillmaker. "You have to go on no matter what; you can't just sulk about it."

With this positive attitude, she accepted an invitation to speak at the Gift of Sight Gala in Chicago, after she received her third corneal transplant. The Gift of Sight Gala is an annual fundraising event by the Illinois Eye-Bank, the organization which provided the corneas for Stillmaker's transplants.

After the Gala, Stillmaker and her mother looked for other organizations that advocated organ and tissue donation and contact lens safety that they could work with, including Prevent Blindness America, Gift of Hope and Donate Life.

As a part of Prevent Blindness America's Eyes on Capitol Hill campaign, Stillmaker visited Washington, D.C., to share her story with lawmakers and encourage them to enact legislation to improve eye care and treatment across the United States.

Stillmaker's current charitable project is heading up Knox College's part in the Donate Life Illinois 2008 Campus Challenge. The Campus Challenge consists of various Illinois colleges and universities in a friendly competition to try and register as many new organ and tissue donors as possible by directing them to Donate Life's registration Web site: [www.iamareyou.org](http://www.iamareyou.org).

The registration drive is not limited to college students, anyone 18 years or older is eligible to donate. Stillmaker would like to see participation in the drive from not only college students, but absolutely anyone who wants to save the lives of others. The six-week challenge ends Nov. 14. "If it weren't for organ and tissue donors, I'd be blind in my left eye right now," said Stillmaker. "Please register, one donor alone can save 26-plus lives."