

Service of Remembrance part of observances for National Donor Sabbath



Joe Gardner, 44, has almost completed his degree in graphic design at Lincoln Land Community College since his heart transplant last year. Gardner will be among organ donor recipients who will address families of organ, eye and tissue donors during the Service of Remembrance program at 2 p.m. today at Washington Park Botanical Garden. Shannon Kirshner/The State Journal-Register

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Joe Gardner's lifespan was in question before he received a heart transplant.

Gardner was so sick from cardiomyopathy — a serious disease that inflames the heart muscle — that by 2005 he was given a defibrillator/pacemaker. Over a roughly two-year period, the device kicked in 20 to 30 times, saving him for a life that was quickly going downhill.

“Eventually, I wound up getting so run-down and so sick that I couldn't work anymore,” said Gardner, 44, a former rural mail carrier, limousine driver and school bus driver. He couldn't live by himself, so he moved in with his parents in Divernon.

Gardner was told that his troubles stemmed first from sleep apnea that led to an irregular heartbeat (atrial fibrillation). And that eventually caused congestive heart failure, which led to cardiomyopathy. He endured placement of a defibrillator/pacemaker, aortic pump and an LVAD (left ventricular assist device), and says he was in the hospital “pretty much from the end of 2006 to almost all of 2007.”

The last option to remedy Gardner’s deteriorating condition was the heart transplant he received Sept. 4, 2007, at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago.

“It’s been great since,” Gardner said.

Gardner will be among organ donor recipients who will address families of organ, eye and tissue donors during the Service of Remembrance program at 2 p.m. today at Washington Park Botanical Garden.

The Gift of Hope Organ & Tissue Donor Network and Heartland Lions Eye Banks are sponsoring the service in conjunction with the pastoral care departments of St. John’s Hospital and Memorial Medical Center. The service is part of observances of National Donor Sabbath, held Friday through today.

More than 4,700 people are waiting for organ transplants in Illinois.

Although Gardner may not specifically address his donor family, who has yet to contact him, he said he can’t emphasize enough what the gift of a heart has meant.

Gardner has resumed classes toward an associate degree in graphic design at Lincoln Land Community College. He’s able to attend his teenage daughter’s activities and spend time with her. It’s like “being reborn,” he said, and he owes his newfound vitality to someone who lost his life.

“I’m probably going to watch my daughter graduate. I’m 99.9 percent sure I will,” Gardner said. “I hope to see her married and everything else. I’ve got a whole life ahead of me, that a year ago, two years ago, I would not have thought it was possible.”

Another Service of Remembrance speaker is Sue Kesselring, 66, who retired from her job at a Springfield bank in 2003.

Before receiving a cornea transplant in her right eye in October 1999, Kesselring, of Ashland, had become frustrated at work because of her growing inability to see the spreadsheets and other financial information she gathered for senior managers and the board of directors.

“Eights and fives and sixes would all look alike. I was getting very discouraged and depressed ... I was lucky enough that my boss got me a monitor that was 19 inches. It allowed me to see and to do my job,” she said.

Kesselring was diagnosed with Fuchs' dystrophy after a referral to ophthalmologist Dr. Eric Lohse. Lohse put her on a waiting list for a cornea transplant. She was told the wait could be up to a year, but the call that a donor cornea was available for Kesselring came in about six months.

The transplant has restored her sight in the right eye to 20/30 without glasses.

“It's a gift from the donor family. It's through their kindness and their understanding of what this can do for others (that helps) us to restore our sight,” said Kesselring, who doesn't know the donor of her cornea. Her left eye also has Fuchs' dystrophy, so she may have to have another cornea transplant in a year or two.

“It's just a wonderful thing. It's the hardest time for them when they've just lost a loved one, but yet, to see beyond that and to see what their donation can do for others.”

Joe Gardner wrote a letter to his donor family six months after his surgery. He hopes to hear from the family to know that they received his gratitude and for his own closure.

“It's really hard to write a letter to someone that you don't know. You don't know the situation that happened. It's just trying to express your gratitude while they're going through grief,” said Gardner, who experienced his own grief in knowing that someone died for him to live.

“I would love to hear from them. Not to bother them or anything. It's almost to give myself closure as to who the person was. It's so important to me to find out who they were. I don't know why.”

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