

Transplant recipient to ride in Rose Bowl Parade

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December 23, 2007

Bennie Marshall can relate to the long odds facing Illinois' Rose Bowl-bound football team.

In June 2000, Marshall nearly slipped into a coma as he awaited a new liver. A transplant could save him, but there only was a remote possibility an organ would be found in time.

"I was gravely ill," he said. "My mom called my name for 12 hours to keep my eyes from rolling back in my head. If I didn't have a strong family, I would've given up the will to live."

Marshall, 53, got his miracle.

Now he's hoping he'll bring some luck to my beloved Illini, widely considered the underdogs in the New Year's Day challenge against the University of Southern California in Pasadena, Calif.

The United Airlines ramp service worker is the only Illinoisan selected to ride on the Donate Life Float in the Rose Bowl Parade.

"It's the thrill of a lifetime," said Marshall, of Chicago's Ashburn community.

The 24 donor recipients chosen for the float call attention to a critical shortage of available organs and a transplant waiting list with more than 4,700 Illinois residents and 98,000 people nationwide.

Marshall first applied for the Rose Parade contingent three years ago - an all-expenses-paid, five-day trip for two ---but fate held off until his favorite college team earned a chance to win the Rose Bowl for the first time since 1964.

A decade before that championship, Marshall was born in Mississippi to a sharecropper father, Bossie, and a homemaker mother, Mamie. He has two sisters and a brother.

Bossie Marshall, who was pulled out of school at age 9 to work in the fields, moved his family to Chicago's South Side when Bennie was a baby.

"He wanted to advance and do better," his son said. "My parents are God-fearing people who taught us to try our hardest. One person at a time can change the world."

Marshall's first real test came in 1999.

A close friend in his apartment building was murdered by her boyfriend, leaving two children without a mother.

Marshall stepped in. He's now a surrogate parent to Damone, 9, and Jasmine, 7.

"They're my little angels," he said.

The woman's death also taught Marshall the value of being an organ donor. Her organs saved seven lives.

Less than a year later, Marshall was told he had only days to live unless he received a new liver.

His illness stemmed from a 1978 car accident after which he received tainted blood during a transfusion. An infection crept into his liver, where it silently wrecked the organ for two decades.

Marshall was on the transplant waiting list for 23 days. He is convinced he wouldn't have survived the 24th day.

"I was fighting an uphill battle, hoping and praying some family would be kind enough to give me an organ," he said.

The relatives of a 23-year-old man from Chicago's West Side who was killed by a gunshot wound did just that. Marshall has never met his donor's family, but he hopes to one day.

"Maybe I can encourage them by letting them know I try to be positive and do some good things," he said. "Once you become an organ recipient, you feel like you should give back whatever you can."

After he recovered from the transplant, Marshall started volunteering for the Gift of Hope Organ & Tissue Donor Network's African-American Task Force.

He speaks at schools, churches and to community groups to quash misconceptions about donating and receiving organs.

"In the black community, there are myths about who can get an organ and how," he said. "People think if a doctor knows you're a donor, he won't try to save you, that rich people get organs first and black people get organs last. None of that is true."

Dave Bosch, past president of Donate Life America and chair of the Donate Life Illinois, said Bennie's outreach helps to bridge the gap between the number of African-Americans who need an organ and the number who donate.

As of Dec. 14, black patients made up 37 percent of the waiting list for organ donations in Illinois, though only 19 percent of donors are black, according to the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network.

"The sad reality is there are people dying waiting for an organ," Bosch said. "It's a public health crisis, but one that we can control. We know the solution for this."

Marshall puts it another way.

"You can't take your organs with you to heaven, so you might as well leave them on Earth where they might do some good," he said.

In addition to riding in his first parade and going to the Rose Bowl, Marshall said he sent in an application to be on "Deal or No Deal."

"It's just for fun," he said. "I already got a lifetime gift. You can't put a price on this. It's better than winning a million dollars."

To join the organ donor registry, visit www.donatelifellinois.org.

Know a Southlander with a claim to fame? Send me a note.

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