

## Anniversary reminds woman of donor's gift

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Mary Magee-Huth celebrated a milestone last month. Eight years ago in October, Magee-Huth received a kidney and pancreas transplant. Now every year around her anniversary she makes a point of speaking to a local organization, a high school or a church to share her story.

It's important to Magee-Huth that others understand the importance of being an organ donor and what a wonderful gift it is to be the recipient.

Magee-Huth had been an insulin dependent diabetic for 30 years--since she was 11 years old. Even with the utmost care, years of rising and falling blood sugars can take a toll on the body. For women, having children increases the risks of diabetic complications.



**Mary Magee-Huth is celebrating eight years since she received a transplant from an 18-year-old organ donor.**

*photo by kris stadalsky*

But Magee-Huth made the decision to have two children and it wasn't until the youngest was eight years old, in 2000, that her kidneys finally gave out under the strain of diabetes. She had not been feeling good for a whole year.

"You are exhausted all the time when your body is not functioning well," she said.

She was on four shots of insulin a day to control blood sugar and tested her sugar levels eight times a day. When her kidneys failed completely, she started dialysis treatments three times a week, three hours each time.

Dialysis itself is both physically and mentally challenging, said Magee-Huth. The first time she went through the procedure it really hit her that there was no turning back.

There would be dialysis, a transplant or death.

In her mind Magee-Huth chose a transplant. Despite her doctor's warnings that not everyone gets one, Magee-Huth was determined.

Despite her health problems, she was very physically fit. She had been extremely active all her life from sports in high school to an aerobics instructor to her current position as assistant fitness coordinator with the Joliet Park District.

Doctors told her that if she did get a transplant, she would be very good soil, she said. But the wait could be a long one.

But just two months after being on dialysis, Magee-Huth got the call that changed her life. "I was very fortunate," she said. "It's almost unheard of (to get organs in two months). I feel like I am one of the lucky ones."

Eight years ago when Magee-Huth received her pancreas and kidney transplant, a person was added to the organ waiting list every 16 minutes; that's now grown to every 13 minutes. An average of 18 people die every day waiting for organs and in Illinois alone more than 47,000 people are waiting.

That's why Magee-Huth wants to share her story with others: To dispel myths and fears about being an organ donor. Some people are afraid a medical professional wouldn't do everything possible to save their life if they are an organ donor. You have to be brain dead and on life support, said Magee-Huth, before they would take organs.

And while organ donation can be very difficult for the family of the dying, it can also be rewarding. Many times an organ donor is the victim of a tragedy, said Magee-Huth. "You can never make sense out of a tragedy. But the peace (organ donation) it sometimes brings to the family is immeasurable."

A year and a half after the double transplant that saved her life, Magee-Huth contacted the hospital and asked to have her information sent on to her donor's family. Before that she couldn't bear to think of the person who had died and given her life. She reminded herself what she was told repeatedly at the hospital, the donor would die either way and she just happened to be the one to receive his organs.

The donor was just 18 years old when he was accidentally shot. Magee-Huth refers to him only as Mikey. She carries his picture with him and shows it to people when she talks about organ donation.

When she first got the phone call telling her she was selected, Magee-Huth was extremely excited. "Then you get to the hospital and find out he was only 18, you think, oh my God."

She has since met with Mikey's father and they have found a connection. "He kept thanking me," said Magee-Huth. "I was overwhelmed. I kept thanking him for abiding by his son's wishes."

Magee-Huth says she doesn't take her experience or Mikey's gift for granted. She calls her kidney and pancreas precious cargo and does everything she can to take care of them. She is on 22 pills a day so she doesn't reject the organs and she keeps herself healthy and fit.

While she has some restrictions on her activity level, she still teaches Pilates at Joliet Park District, where she's been employed for 20 years.

It hasn't been so long ago that Magee-Huth doesn't remember the days before her transplant. She had no energy and once she started dialysis she would lose days sick on the couch or sleeping.

"The thought of spending the rest of my life without the get-up-and-go was very scary," she said.

On her yearly anniversary Magee-Huth spends time with family and friends. They marvel at how she's gotten color back in her face and no longer looks like a ghost. This anniversary is even more important to her.

"Hitting the eight year mark and feeling good is a triumph for me," she said.

For information on organ donation, go to [www.donatelifellinois.org](http://www.donatelifellinois.org).

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