

WINGS OF HONOR



Organ and tissue donation is an unselfish act by donors and their families that saves and improves lives. It literally is giving the gift of life. Mercy Medical Center's new organ, tissue and eye Donor Memorial Wall serves as a tribute to donors, as well as a symbol to raise awareness about the importance of donation.

Sign up to become a donor today at www.iowadonornetwork.com. For information about having a donor's name on the Donor Memorial Wall, contact Stephanie Cooper, co-chair of Mercy's organ donation committee, at (319) 369-4664. Listen to Josh Burdette, who has had two organ transplants, share his story at www.youtube.com/mercymedicalcentercr.



Unveiled April 18 on the second floor of Mercy's Lundy Pavilion, the wall serves as a place where family and friends of those who donate may find comfort and a place for reflection.

For Jan Burdette, a cardiac echo technician at Mercy, the wall has special significance. Organ donors twice saved the life of her son, Josh.

In 2005, Josh was a healthy 24-year-old living in California – until he called his mother several days in a row complaining of breathing difficulties. Jan made plans to fly to California, and a week later Josh was in a coma. “He was dying before my eyes,” she remembers.

Josh was transferred to the University of California San Francisco (UCSF) Medical Center, where he was kept alive on an Extracorporeal Membrane Oxygenation (ECMO) machine and the idea of a transplant was first introduced.

Unfortunately, the UCSF transplant surgeon was away visiting a hospital on Hawaii, the Big Island. But his staff alerted him about Josh's arrival and kept him apprised of his condition. Coincidentally, the surgeon learned of a 22-year-old male in the Hawaiian hospital whose family was asking about the possibility of organ donation as they dealt with their loss.

“It was such a miracle of faith that happened. They (the lungs) were the perfect (tissue) type, blood and size match – it's almost unheard of to have all three at one time,” says Jan.

Plans were made to fly the surgeon back to San Francisco with the lungs to perform Josh's transplant surgery. Six months later, Josh was back at work and feeling great. Jan says, “I was so grateful for this family who, at the lowest time of their life, was thinking of someone else – and it happened to be my son. We are so grateful for the decision they made that night.”

Then, nearly five years later, Josh once again became short of breath. “Fifty percent of lung transplant patients begin to reject their lung around five years after the transplant,” explains Jan. “He became very, very ill again. He moved here (to Cedar Rapids) after I called the University of Iowa to make sure they would accept him into their organ transplant program. They tried to turn him around but, unfortunately, he

was in full rejection. So, he was admitted to University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics and put on the ECMO again.

“On Feb. 2, 2012, we were awakened in the middle of the night with the news that a 34-year-old gentleman had died. The blood and tissue type were a perfect match; the size (of the lungs) was a little big, but they were willing to work with that,” Jan says.

Josh had the transplant and is doing great now. Jan and her family, many of whom work at Mercy, have become passionate advocates for organ donation. Family members who work at Mercy include her daughter, Jessica Braksiek, a patient care coordinator in the Emergency Department, and her sisters, Rosie Denes and Kathy Smelser, who both work in Clinical Improvement & Accreditation.

“Josh wouldn't be here without organ donation, and he knows what a gift that is. It is so important for donors and their families to know how much their gift is appreciated. Words can't express how much we owe them.

“I can only hope this wall at Mercy will give them a place to reflect and know that the choice they made – and their loss – hasn't been forgotten. Every day I think about the gift they give,” says Jan.

Funded by a grant from the Iowa Department of Public Health, Mercy held a contest for the design of the wall. Mercy's Organ Donation Committee selected the beautiful work of two local artists: Lisa Lindley, a designer with Lisa Lindley Interior Architecture, and Suzy McGrane-Hop, a certified fine art appraiser with Gilded Pear Gallery, both in Cedar Rapids.

Vicki Huntington, Mercy's organ donation committee co-chair, notes, “The design created by Lisa and Suzy will live for years to come to remember and celebrate those who provide the greatest gift: the gift of life or sight to someone else.”

About 600 Iowans are on the waiting list for organ donations and more than 1.8 million people are registered as organ donors through the Iowa Donor Network.