

Local Heart Transplant Survivor Pays It Forward

Donation Agency Works With Candidates, Families To Encourage Donation



Glenn Matsuki, a Long Beach resident who had a heart transplant in 1995, chose to dedicate his life to honor his donor by volunteering and working at Cedars-Sinai for six years, helping other transplant recipients. In 2006, Matsuki left Cedars-Sinai to become a hospital services coordinator with the non-profit organ recovery group OneLegacy. (Photograph courtesy of OneLegacy)

■ By **TIFFANY RIDER**
Staff Writer

Long Beach resident Glenn Matsuki is a 17-year survivor of a heart transplant, thanks to a donor he never knew. Today, Matsuki strives to show his appreciation for the donation by working with the organ recovery group managing the largest donor area in California.

At age 45, a healthy Matsuki contracted a flu virus that after only five weeks put him into congestive heart failure. His doctor told him he would need to have a heart transplant. Matsuki was referred to Cedars-Sinai, a nonprofit hospital in Los Angeles, where he received outpatient treatment for several months while waiting for a heart. One night, Matsuki came home from working a half-day at his job and felt he was near death. He

spent the evening with his family and said emotional goodbyes before going to bed.

And then the phone rang.

In the middle of the night, his doctor at Cedars-Sinai called him to the hospital and Matsuki received his new heart. Within days, Matsuki felt well enough to go home and has since made a full recovery. Although he was overwhelmed with joy for his new heart, Matsuki said he was also thrown into mourning for the heart's previous owner. He reached out to the family via letter, but never received a response. To honor his donor, Matsuki said, he volunteered and worked for six years at Cedars-Sinai helping other transplant recipients. In 2006, Glenn left Cedars-Sinai to become a hospital services coordinator with OneLegacy, a Southern California transplant donor organization.

"I'm able to be an example to these newly transplanted people or people even waiting for a transplant," Matsuki said of his job with OneLegacy. "Once they see someone who's gone through the process and has done well, for them that's an encouragement to do just as well and to take care of that special gift, to take care of that gift that someone gave you."

OneLegacy manages organ recovery at various Southern California hospitals, including Miller Children's Medical Center in Long Beach. Matsuki works with the children's hospital to encourage families to donate their loved ones organs. "I work with hospitals to recognize that compassionate end-of-life care can bring meaning and comfort through the donation process," he said. "It is the right thing to do."

In 1995, when Matsuki was placed on



To honor those who have donated their organs, Miller Children’s Hospital of Long Beach raises the Donate Life California flag upon organ recovery. The hospital flies the flag for eight days, representing the eight possible organs that can be donated from each individual donor. (Photograph courtesy of Karyn Packard)

organ is the liver. “Four out of every five people on the list are in need of a kidney,” he said. “Less common are the heart, lung and pancreas.” Once an individual is approved to be on the Donate Life organ transplant list, the sickest of those patients are placed at the top of the list. As soon as an organ becomes available, the patient’s doctor is notified and the organ is transported at just above freezing temperatures to the transplant recipient for surgery.

California DMV Requires Organ Donor Answer

In an effort to increase the number of eligible organ donors, knowing whether or not you would be willing to donate organs upon brain death became a requirement on the application for a driver’s license or state identification card in California on July 1.

The California Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), in partnership with Donate Life California, now requires all new driver’s license and I.D. card applicants to either check a box stating, “Yes, add my name to the donor registry,” or “I do not wish to register at this time.” Stewart said the DMV changed this element of the application, which previously required no answer, to clarify the applicant’s intent and to help increase the number of registered donors.

Stewart, past president of Donate Life California, said individuals come up with a variety of reasons why they opt out of registering as an organ donor. “They may have some shred of doubt that leaves them shy of wanting to check ‘yes’ and be done with it,” he said. “So they could be 90 percent for donation, but there’s that lingering doubt that they don’t know enough about this. To check yes, you need to have a high level of certainty.”

Another reason individuals don’t get the pink sticker on their license while at the DMV is because he or she may want to consult their family or elders for guidance to make the decision. Further still, applicants may just not want to be added to another government-associated list.

The DMV has been providing Californians the opportunity to sign up as

the national transplant wait list, there were about 45,000 people on that list, he said. He was fortunate that the number was so low compared to the nearly 111,800 people waiting for a new organ today, he said.

According to the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network, California has had 28,076 people donate organs to save lives since January 1, 1988.

“People think that organ donation is very common, when in fact one-half of one percent of all deaths will occur under circumstances where people can actually be organ donors,” said Bryan Stewart, director of communications for OneLegacy. “The reason why is the heart needs to be beating, but the patient has to be declared brain dead. So in order for that to happen, you need to have a localized, major head injury where the rest of the body can be kept functioning so the organs can continue to be profuse with blood and oxygen,” such as a stroke or brain aneurysm.

People who have died of heart failure or physical trauma are not eligible donors, though in some cases a body may continue to function after an individual has died from serious brain damage caused by a physical

accident. This is in terms of legal death, which may be different from death when considering religious or spiritual beliefs.

Sometimes the decision to donate is made based upon such beliefs of death. A variety of world religions encourage – but do not mandate – organ donation, such as Catholicism and various denominations of Christianity. For example, the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution in 1988 encouraging doctors to request organ donation in the spirit of stewardship and to alleviate suffering.

In Hinduism, the body is no more than a machine after the soul has departed; therefore organ donation is acceptable post-consciousness. In Buddhism, there are also no rules for or against organ donation, though some believe the consciousness may stay in the body for a time after a person takes her or his last breath. In that case, those Buddhists – including Tibetan Buddhists – believe it is important the body remains undisturbed until the consciousness has left in order to prevent harm to their future lives.

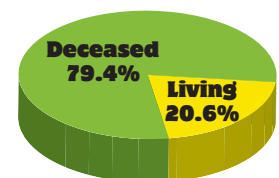
Regardless of beliefs, organs are still in demand and the most needed is the kidney, Stewart said. The second most needed

Organs Of Deceased Donors Recovered In California By Circumstance Of Death

	2011	2010	2009	2008	2007	2006	2005	2004	2003	2002	2001
Child Abuse	4	10	10	9	9	5	7	2	5	5	4
Homicide	15	71	73	97	100	94	75	66	58	69	64
Motor Vehicle Accident	31	87	113	104	143	155	149	138	131	131	99
Natural Causes	175	375	386	405	326	202	151	127	120	124	120
Non-Motor Vehicle Accident	33	87	76	80	70	90	81	58	52	51	46
None of the above	24	81	80	78	132	291	293	291	276	236	250
Suicide	18	74	60	50	47	57	50	50	54	32	49
Total Circumstances	300	785	798	823	827	894	806	732	696	648	632

*Source: Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network

Transplants By Donor Type



61,953 Total Transplants Since 1988

*Source: Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network

The chart shows the number of organs recovered in California from deceased donors over the past 10 years, categorized by circumstance of death. Since 2007, the majority of the individuals whose organs were transplanted in California died of natural causes. (Graphic by the Business Journal’s Aaron Dees)

an organ donor at the same time they apply or renew driver licenses or I.D. cards for the past five years, in partnership with Donate Life California. According to the DMV, more than 8.5 million Californians registered as organ and tissue donors through the Donate Life state organ donor registry in those first five years.

“Our partnership with Donate Life California has made a difference in thousands of lives, and, within our own DMV family,” George Valverde, director of the DMV, said in a statement. “We have seen the lives of our own employees personally touched by organ donation – some have donated organs to loved ones, received

transplants themselves or are still in need of life-saving donations.”

According to Stewart, 27 percent of DMV customers who are in the position to check ‘yes’ to become a donor do so. However, that number is small compared to the 70 percent who say yes at the hospital through OneLegacy, Stewart said. The organization employees work with the families of donor candidates and the candidates themselves to provide information on what it means to give up vital organs after brain death.

“That’s the other thing at the DMV,” Stewart said. “A lot of people don’t have enough correct information to make a

confident decision. But once they have the information at the hospital and they’re faced with the loss of a loved one, we’re seeing donation at very high rates.” Stewart attributes this to the ability to start the discussion about organ donation with the candidate or candidate’s family, since some people don’t talk about what their wishes are until it may be too late. “It’s important to let your loved ones know your wishes,” he said. ■