

Solace

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A Newsletter for Organ and Tissue Donor Families

Beyond THE DONATION

loved ones

Most people don't give much thought about organ and tissue donation until they are faced with end of life decisions for their loved one. Most people are also unaware that there are organizations that facilitate the entire process. Mid-America Transplant Services (MTS) is one of those agencies. MTS is a non-profit organization that was founded 40 years ago to assist in the coordination of kidney donations. We now coordinate all aspects of the organ donation process, beginning with obtaining authorization from the Donor Family, to scheduling the operating room and preservation of the organs and tissue.

Our dedicated staff, many of whom have been through loss and donation themselves, are fully committed to our mission and finding ways to improve the support we provide to Donor Families as well as organ and tissue recipients.

Supporting Families Through the Grief Journey

In addition to coordinating all aspects of the donation process, MTS offers a variety of support services to Donor Families to assist them in progressing through their grief journey. "We listen to donor families and meet their needs. The key is to provide the support they need to travel their grief journey," said Merry Smith, Director of the Center for Life. "Staff provides appropriate resources and referrals to community services as needed to help the families heal."

One program available to Donor Families is the Grief Companion® Program which is designed to connect individuals who have experienced similar losses and provide a companion for individuals experiencing and needing support for a recent loss. The role of a companion is to listen and provide support for the Donor Family member without worry of being misunderstood or judged. According to Cindy, whose husband gave the *Gift of Life*, "My grief companion gave freely of her time whenever I needed to talk. I can't say enough about how beneficial it has been to have someone to speak with and know I wouldn't be judged. I was always comfortable sharing my emotions with her. She reassured me that what I was experiencing was normal."

In addition, we have expanded to meet the ongoing needs of Donor Families and honor their loved ones before, during, and after the



donation. Throughout our history, we have followed our core values of compassion, quality, teamwork, innovation, and integrity to create a meaningful donation experience for Donor Families, which is at the heart of what matters

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THE **gift** OF life



honor

Honoring Donors by Helping Transplant Patients

Donor Families can also participate in many ongoing supports offered by MTS for as long as they need help and well beyond the time of donation. These supports include:

- Answering questions regarding the donation process or recipient information.
- Talking about specific bereavement needs and making connections between families and resources within their community.
- Connecting bereaved families through a private Facebook group that provides a virtual support group available 24 hours a day, seven days per week.
- Hosting informational workshops about donation and presenting practical ideas about how to get through difficult anniversaries and holidays.
- Sharing bereavement resources such as books, pamphlets and articles to help you understand your grief.
- Hosting Candlelight Memorial Ceremonies honoring those who gave the Gift of Life. The Ceremonies provide a way for Donor Families to gather with others in a shared experience.

MTS also provides support to organ and tissue recipients to ensure successful transplants, which is the ultimate tribute to the donor. “Everything we do at MTS happens because of the generosity of Donor Families,” said Tammy McLane, Director of Corporate Communications. “We want to honor them and the *Gift of Life* shared by their loved ones. Many recipients are able to enjoy their life because of that gift.”

MTS understands the importance of helping recipients along their transplant journey and helping to remove some of the obstacles experienced by transplant patients. One obstacle they often face is the need for mid- to long-term housing. MTS recently opened a Family House that offers comfortable, safe and affordable single-family apartment living for patients and their families who must relocate to St. Louis to receive life saving pre- and post-transplant care. When staying at the MTS Family House, patients and their loved ones have one less thing to worry about.

Another way that MTS removes obstacles is through the MTS Recipient Fund. People waiting for a transplant often struggle financially because of mounting medical and housing expenses. A social worker at one of the local transplant centers will petition on behalf of the recipient for assistance with paying utility bills, paying for medical services or other financial needs.

Because of the generosity of donors and their families, MTS has been able to successfully fulfill its mission to save lives through excellence in organ and tissue donation.



*If you are interested in any of the programs or opportunities listed above,
please contact Sandra Cushing at 1-800-925-3666 or by email at scushing@mts-stl.org.*

Grateful Recipient PAYS IT FORWARD

thankful

“Receiving a new kidney has meant that I no longer have to travel to a dialysis center three times a week, every week, for six to eight hours of treatment each time. I am so grateful to the family who made the decision to donate their loved one’s organs, because I now have more time to devote to my family as well as my ministry work,” said Rev. Lauren Andrew Hickman who received a kidney transplant on May 14, 2013 after 11.5 years of dialysis.

“The support provided by MTS during my pre-transplant days was phenomenal.”

Rev. Hickman was on a mission trip in the Appalachian Mountains in 2002 when he fell ill and was rushed to the hospital. He was diagnosed with end stage renal failure. Although he was diagnosed with hypertension at age 13, he was not prescribed medication until he was in his 20s. “The kidney failure was a result of me not taking my high blood pressure medication,” Rev. Hickman said. “I was young, foolish, and didn’t take it seriously enough.”

For more than a decade, Rev. Hickman survived with consistent dialysis and a supportive church family while patiently waiting for a kidney transplant. The time involved in dialysis was his biggest challenge. At first, his treatments were in the morning during the workday. The supportive staff at West Side Missionary Baptist Church allowed Rev. Hickman to come in late on treatment days and work longer hours on non-treatment days. “I was fortunate because I was working for the church at the time, and they were extremely kind to me. I was able to endure the challenges of being a dialysis patient mainly because of my faith in Jesus Christ and the love, support and never-ending encouragement of my family, friends and my church family.”

Rev. Hickman is a member of the support staff at the West Side Missionary Baptist Church and serves as an administrative assistant to the Senior Pastor. He also serves as an Associate Minister and Sunday Morning Bible Study Teacher. Because of the kidney transplant, he is able to work full time and participate more actively with two additional organizations that he loves: The Saint Louis Gospel Choral Union and the Legend Singers Choral Ensemble. “I have a great love for music and these two groups allow me the opportunity to continue to foster that love.”

“I also plan to become a volunteer with Mid-America Transplant Services. The support provided by MTS during my pre-transplant days was phenomenal. They offered resources that gave me courage to make it through some challenging times, and because of that, I know it is the right thing to give back some of my time to encourage and support someone who finds themselves in a place where I once was.”



Hope BRINGS HEALING*hope*

“A person’s life can be turned upside down in a moment, like a rug ripped out from underneath,” Cheryl Cheatham-Kreader shared. “Eight years ago, my husband, Bert, retired early at age 64. We bought a piece of land in the country and built our dream home. We had not even finished unpacking when he died of a heart attack in the backyard. I called 911 and performed CPR, but it was already too late.”

Cheryl’s decision to help others by donating Bert’s tissue was an easy one, as she had already made the same decision when each of her parents passed. “Bert was a devoted family man and a wonderful husband. He loved fishing, house projects and BBQ. His favorite clothes were holey jeans, a T-shirt, and work boots. His death left me a 44-year-old widow with two children. I was shocked and filled with disbelief that this had happened to me. I felt extreme sadness and loneliness, and I was scared.”

Through a series of counselors, grief groups, reading a lot of books, and talking with people at Mid-America Transplant Services, Cheryl found her way out of the darkness. “The turning point for me was speaking to a staff person at MTS. She had buried her baby and husband after an accident. I thought if this woman can find her way after that, then I can do it. It gave me a little bit of light to hang onto. It was not easy, but with help I was able to make it through this horror.”

Cheryl still lives in the house that she and Bert built, however, “I had to change things to make it mine and not ours. I redid the kitchen, deck and family room. Also, within a couple of months,

“If someone had told me at the time that I would find happiness again in any form, I would never have believed it.”

I went through his clothes and donated things and sold his car, because I couldn’t bear to look at it. There are always triggers, reminders of my life that once was. Some days I think about how easily I might go back to that sorrowful, pitiful, depressing world. I have learned to tuck it deep, deal with it, and not let it consume me.”



“If someone had told me at the time that I would find happiness again in any form, I would never have believed it.” One thing that helped Cheryl to heal is volunteering as a grief companion through MTS. She has been paired with four women in the past two years who have also lost their husbands. “I have been given the opportunity to help someone through one of the most difficult times of their life, and I try to help them find their new normal. When I tell people that I was able to find happiness again, they think, ‘If she did it, maybe I can do it.’ Sharing my story of grief and healing gives them hope.”

“MTS is one of the best organizations providing resources to help a grieving family. They are the nicest, most compassionate people I have ever met. I could not have gotten through my experience without them. If I can be part of that and pay it forward to help one person—how awesome would that be?”

If you are interested in becoming a trained grief companion in the Grief Companion Program, contact Sandra Cushing at 314-735-8285 or scushing@mts-stl.org.

OUT OF DARKNESS *Comes Light*

Life

“My son was awesome,” says Angela Johnson of her son, DaVon Douglas Steward, who was murdered 13 years ago when he was 16 years old. “He was a charmer and a practical joker. DaVon never met a stranger and was always willing to help others.” When Angela was approached in the hospital about donating DaVon’s organs and tissue, her daughter reminded her of DaVon’s giving spirit and how he would want to help others, even in his death. “My son gave the greatest gift he could ever give, and 23 lives were blessed by his gift.”

After DaVon’s death, Angela went to counseling, grief centers, and support groups for mothers of murdered children, but nothing relieved her pain. “I had a nervous breakdown. I missed my son and was very afraid of everything. I didn’t leave my house for a couple of years.” Angela tried to escape the pain by moving to Texas, but people can’t escape their own feelings. Eventually, she returned to St. Louis to heal.

her story. Angela’s best friend made a video of her talking about her son: who he was, what happened to him, that he was a real person. “Whenever I tell my story, I smile. People don’t understand why I would smile while talking about the loss of my son, but it makes me happy to know that my story—DaVon’s story—can help others.”

Angela still visits DaVon’s grave to mark significant events like his birthday and the anniversary of his death. She also finds

“Being a volunteer with MTS saved my life.”

other ways to honor him and keep his memory alive. She brings her daughter and granddaughter to volunteer at donor registration events and attends the candlelight vigils organized by MTS. In cooperation with the Missouri Community College Association,



“My son gave the greatest gift he could ever give, and 23 lives were blessed by his gift.”



Angela turned to Mid-America Transplant Services for support, and after hearing the loss story of a staff member, decided to volunteer. This decision marked a turning point in her grief journey. “Being a volunteer with MTS saved my life. I was at a point where I couldn’t function anymore, but they gave me support, encouragement, love and understanding that helped me get through the tragedy of having my child snatched away.”

“I am happier now with MTS than I ever was without them. I started to smile again. I have a purpose.” Angela conducts registry drives to honor her son’s memory and to make people aware of the need for organ and tissue donation. She also shares her story about DaVon to students in the MTS education program. Sharing her story not only helps Angela to heal, it makes an impact on others who become organ and tissue donors because they are inspired by

Angela is also organizing a statewide donor drive in September to increase awareness and outreach for organ and tissue donation. The event will mark what would have been DaVon’s 30th birthday.

“Myself and most of my family have registered as organ donors. You can’t take it with you, and I would want to bless someone else with life if mine was coming to an end.”

If you are interested in becoming a volunteer like Angela, please contact T’Shon Young at 314-735-8465 or tyoung@mts-stl.org.

Trusting Your Future Self; EMBRACING THE YOU OF TODAY

by Rainey Segars, Coordinator with Green Bay Hospice

This article was reprinted with the permission of the author

I lay awake, flipping over and over again, trying to find the coldest spot on a too-warm pillow. I was contributing to the sleeplessness that so often plagues grievers, unable to slow my heartbeat and relax enough to doze, because I was so terrified of the Christmas to come. It would be our family's first Christmas without him, with the turkey he always brined and his big laugh during the Christmas movies we always watched. When the presents were all opened, he wouldn't be there to force us into the big pile of wrapping paper on the floor for the Christmas picture. I would have to crawl my way through every one of those painful moments during a day that was supposed to be all smiles, and I didn't know how I was going to do it without collapsing. I was keeping myself awake from the fear and pressure to make a plan now for how I was going to handle it.

This kind of fear – of all those big “firsts” after loss – is very common. In my situation, the problem was that it was only April.

When I meet with those who grieve, one of the most common feelings they describe is dread. They are terrified of the future and the thousands of tiny hurts that future might contain. Some of

the things they dread are bigger milestones: the holiday season, their loved one's birthday, an upcoming wedding or a family event they will now have to attend alone. Some of the things they dread are small, everyday things we could normally breeze through:

making dinner, cleaning out a closet, making it to the bank, writing thank you notes for food and flowers. This dread is heavy and distracting, and its weight becomes so burdensome that the normally manageable tasks of today now seem overwhelming.

From those who've grieved, I've learned that often part of what makes the grief journey so painful is not only the present sadness, but also the terrifying vision of a future which it is supposed one could certainly never survive. I've noticed that part of what makes the future seem so overwhelming is that the bereaved assume responsibility of all these future tasks today. They may know, mentally, that Christmas is nine months away and that they don't actually have to start making any of the plans right now, and yet the burden of those plans are actively present in their psyche now. They feel as overwhelmed by those lurking thoughts as they do by the tasks that need doing now.

In our conversations around this, these families and I have developed the language of trusting your future self. An old Jewish religious text gives this advice: “Don't worry about tomorrow. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” This idea, for me, contains

“Don't worry about tomorrow. Each day has enough trouble of its own. This idea, for me, contains the image that you have one “You of Today.” That You of Today has certain jobs that he or she needs to take care of.”

the image that you have one “You of Today.” That You of Today has certain jobs that he or she needs to take care of. The You of Today needs to shower. He needs to put gas in the car. She needs to call someone back. He needs to make it to work. She needs to eat dinner. Often, we forget that there will be a You of Tomorrow. She will take care of meeting that friend for coffee. There will be a You of Next Week. He will manage that family dinner he has to go to. There will be a You of Next Year. She will deal with going to that wedding and finding someone to talk to.

It often helps the bereaved to think of the “you” of tomorrow, of next week, of next month, of next year...as people separate from themselves. All of these “separate people” are equipped with the same skill set you have today. They won't ruin everything. They are just as smart, just as capable, just as able to adjust, adapt and manage. They will take care of it at a future time when burdens have lessened. Trust your future self by embracing the “you” of today.

As I lay awake dreading Christmas without my grandfather, I was torturing and pressuring myself to go ahead and get ready

now, today, for something I would have to face in nine months. Of course that first Christmas would be painful and, of course I should prepare for it, but I was forgetting that I have nine months to grow, to cry about him, and to let the pain dull. I was forgetting the woman who will walk through that Christmas is actually a version of me who will be farther along on the journey, she will have prepared and will handle the situation the best she can. I realized in that moment that I don't have to handle Christmas right now, in the dark, alone. Rather, I will handle it, in the light of day, with family by my side.

Does this mean that we never make plans for the future or establish goals or next steps? Of course not! A wise person plans for things ahead. But making plans for the future is very different than allowing the burden of that future to be an active stressor today. Each day has enough trouble of its own, especially for the bereaved, who are already weary with sadness, drained from sleeplessness, and sluggish from crying. Grief takes so much time and attention. Adding the present day chores is more than enough to face.

Are these burdens in your future already weighing you down? Are future responsibilities already plaguing your mind? If so, consider doing a simple, honest assessment, make a realistic plan to get ready, and then give yourself permission to let go and trust the “you” who will handle that event on that day.

In Memoriam

Mid-America Transplant Services is grateful to receive memorial contributions from those honoring a loved one who has given the *Gift of Life* through organ, tissue and eye donation. These gifts are utilized by the MTS Foundation to support bereavement programs for Donor Families and to help remove obstacles to transplant for patients in need. If you would like more information on the programs and services the MTS Foundation is providing, please visit the MTS website at www.mts-stl.org/foundation.

From January 1, 2014 – May 31, 2014, MTS has received Memorial Contributions in honor of the following organ, tissue and eye donors:

S. Phillips

D. Van Ronzelen

K. McKeirnan

M. Dillick

L. Brown

A. Wappelhorst

B. Buckner

P. Johnston

A. Grace

S. Laschober

H. Cameron

M. Kallal

If you are interested in making a donation in honor of a loved one, you can do so by visiting: www.mts-stl.org/foundation **online-donations/** or by scanning the code at the bottom of this page. This will take you to the online donation page on the MTS website. If you have any questions, Please contact **Sandra Cushing at 800.925.3666.**

Thank you for your gift!





MID-AMERICA TRANSPLANT SERVICES

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Comments or article ideas?
Email us at donorfamily@mts-stl.org

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To change your address or to be removed from the active MTS Mailing List, please contact us at **800-925-3666** or email donorfamily@mts-stl.org.



M I D - A M E R I C A T R A N S P L A N T S E R V I C E S

Solace

THE **gift** OF life

Save THE DATE

The MTS Candlelight Memorial Ceremonies are an opportunity for MTS Donor Families and recipients to come together to honor the *Gift of Life*. A Ceremony is held each year in the spring, in Springfield, Missouri, and MTS will be hosting the following Ceremonies this fall in St. Louis and Cape Girardeau, Missouri. Families who will be attending the Ceremony

are encouraged to submit a photo of their loved one to include in the photo tribute. Photos must be received by September 15, 2014 for the St. Louis Ceremony and by October 29, 2014 for the Cape Girardeau Ceremony. Photos may be sent by email in a jpeg format to DonorFamily@mts-stl.org.

ST. LOUIS

Candlelight Memorial Ceremony **Donor Memorial Monument and Park**

Mid-America Transplant Services
1110 Highlands Plaza Drive East
St. Louis, MO 63110

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2014 - 7:00-8:30PM
– guests will be invited to attend a dessert reception at the conclusion of the ceremony
RSVP's are required

CAPE GIRARDEAU

Candlelight Memorial Ceremony **Cape County Cowboy Church**

220 Orchid Lane
Oak Ridge, MO 63769

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 2014
10:00-11:30AM – guest will be invited to attend a dessert reception at the conclusion of the ceremony
RSVP's are required

How to Make it Through the Holidays

Mid-America Transplant Services
1110 Highlands Plaza Dr. E., Suite 100
St. Louis, MO 63110

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2014
6:00-9:00 PM
RSVP's are required

Invitations will be sent out prior to the date of the events.