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# Organ donation turns one ending into many beginnings



DAVID ZALAZNIK/JOURNAL STAR

A letter received by Jim and Delora "Dee" Tilton helped the Groveland couple ease their grief over the death of Dee's son Jeffrey. The letter, from the Regional Organ Bank of Illinois, listed the recipients of Jeffrey's organ donation and has spurred the couple to become committed to raising awareness of Donate Life Illinois.

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about the help organ donation provides for surviving family members. She is lead volunteer with Donate Life Illinois. Her group staffs informational tables at various events to answer questions and dispel fear about becoming an organ and tissue donor.

"There are more than 100,000 people on the waiting list for an organ. It's hard for me to understand why anyone would not want to register as a donor," she said.

By Clare Howard

GateHouse News Service

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PEORIA, Ill. — Delora "Dee" Tilton was paralyzed with grief following the death of her son Jeffrey. Healing began when she received an unusual letter in the mail at her Groveland home.

The letter was from the Regional Organ Bank of Illinois and contained this information:

- A 54-year-old Illinois woman received Jeffrey's liver. She had suffered from hepatitis C and had waited 10 days for a transplant. She is married with three children.

- A 51-year-old Illinois woman received Jeffrey's pancreas. She had diabetes and had been waiting two years for a transplant. She's married and works as a teacher.

- A 32-year-old Illinois man received Jeffrey's left kidney. He had high blood pressure and had been waiting over four years for a transplant. He is single and works as a stock manager.

- A 68-year-old Illinois woman received Jeffrey's right kidney. She had high blood pressure and had waited four years for a transplant.

- Jeffrey's heart couldn't be used for transplant, but heart valves were recovered. The valves were likely used for patients needing heart valve replacement surgery or children born with heart anomalies.

"I felt such relief when I got that letter. I knew part of Jeff was still living and helping someone else," Tilton said. "I had been on the couch crying for two weeks, and all that changed when the letter arrived."

### Raising awareness

Now, Tilton is committed to raising awareness not only about the need for more registered organ donors but also

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Tilton's husband, Jim, had a kidney transplant 20 years ago before the two were married. Children from the couple's previous marriages are registered as organ donors and their grandchildren volunteer at Donate Life events.

Becoming a donor is now easier than it was when Tilton's son died in 2001. At that time, people registered to become an organ donor by signing a form on the back of their driver's license and having two witnesses sign.

Even with that form, however, final approval was with the family. When her son died, his wife initially declined to allow his organs to be taken. Tilton's other daughters were able to help her reconsider.

"Now she's so glad she changed her mind. She just regrets that she wouldn't allow them to take his eyes," Tilton said. "It's always good to talk with your family in advance so they know your wishes."

### Register in seconds

In 2006, the law in Illinois changed. People can register through the Web site [www.DonateLifeIllinois.org](http://www.DonateLifeIllinois.org), by visiting any Illinois state driver's license facility or by calling the Illinois Secretary of State Organ/Tissue Donor Program at (800) 210-2106.

The new law creates a first-person consent registry that is a legally binding agreement and takes the burden off family members who are already overwhelmed following a death.

Tilton said more than 4.1 million people have joined the registry.

"When people over 18 are asked about joining the registry at the Secretary of State's driver's license facility, 47.6 percent say yes. But 52.4 percent say no," Tilton said. "Our goal is to change that."

Tilton's group meets monthly in Morton and plans activities to raise awareness. The group participated in a campaign in April at Methodist Medical Center to encourage hospital employees to register. The registration table was staffed by either donor families or recipients.

Tilton and her husband represent both.

"Members of our group include four kidney recipients, two pancreas transplants, two double lung transplants, four heart recipients, a grandmother who lost her grandchild at 11 months. We all want to give something back," Tilton said.

"You can't find a better way to give back than by helping someone else. My granddaughter thinks her dad is a hero because he wanted to help others."

### Gift of Hope flag

Methodist and OSF Saint Francis Medical Center raise a special Gift of Hope flag outside the hospital for 24 hours following the death of a patient who is a registered organ donor. The flag is then lowered and given to the donor's family.

The flag went up for the first time in two months on Monday morning at the entrance to the lobby at Methodist following the Sunday death of a 79-year-old woman. Normally, the flag flies about 15 times a year at Methodist.

Jennifer Hoppe, hospital development liaison with Gift of Hope, said there is no age limit for organ donors and there is always a shortage.

Jill Prosser, manager at Methodist Hospice, said even hospice patients who die from cancer may be able to donate corneas.

Jim Tilton said that when he needed a transplant 20 years ago, "I would have been tickled to get the kidney of a 95-year-old person. Let the doctors decide. Maybe you have a bad heart, but your eyes, bone marrow or skin could be used. Be a donor."

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