



One life is lost

Heart transplant recipient tells of the importance of donation

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PEORIA - Percy Baker Jr. is telling a story that Natasha Logan can't.

Baker, the former executive director of the Carver Community Center, underwent a heart transplant February 24, three days before Logan died from a severe asthma attack. She attended Manual High School at the time of her death and was an organ donor, something for which Baker is thankful.

So are four strangers in Illinois who received an organ after the 17-year-old died. Two boys, ages 10 and 13, received her kidneys. A 51-year-old man got her liver. Logan's pancreas went to a 37-year-old male. And Baker is making sure the public knows what those gifts mean to the recipient.

"I am a walking miracle," Baker, a 1968 Manual graduate, told a crowd of students at the South Peoria school. "I encourage you to become more aware of how important it is."

His talk, given Monday morning before the student body, highlighted the need for organ donors by looking at the problem through the prism of his own experience. Baker is now writing a book, tentatively called "Two Lives, One Birth," that he began in his hospital bed chronicling his diagnosis, surgery and recovery.

Cathy Huffman, the regional hospital development manager with Gift of Hope Organ and Tissue Donor Network, said a lack of awareness about the need holds people back from becoming organ donors. Misperceptions - for example that doctors will be less inclined to save dying patients who are donors - or religious taboos also keep potential donors at bay.

But after Baker's speech, students said his message was taking hold.

"Stuff like that really doesn't matter to us like that until something happens and people talk to us about it," said Martika Rumson, a 17-year-old junior and friend of

Logan. "If we die, we're not going to (need our organs) anyway, we might as well help someone else who's living that needs them."

Jose Covarruvias, a 19-year-old senior, agreed. Even though he didn't personally know Logan, Covarruvias said that's beside the point. Organ donation, he said, is about assisting strangers, often when one least expects it.

Baker, 58, received his own heart from a 23-year-old man whom he never knew. He was diagnosed about 10 years ago with systolic heart failure, a condition where the heart's muscles weaken and contract poorly.

It became increasingly clear that he needed a new heart, sending Baker into brief bouts of depression. After assessing his state of health, doctors calculated his chances of surviving at one in 10. "I was a walking dead man," he said at times with a trembling voice.

But his new heart has offered another go-round with life.

To keep his body from rejecting the heart, he takes 31 pills a day and experiences swelling in his legs and feet. To celebrate his healing, Baker bought a poodle named Ebold. He considers it no coincidence the puppy was born the same day as his surgery.

Those interested in registering as an organ donor in Illinois can do so by visiting www.lifegoeson.com.

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