

TheDoingsOakBrook

Hope, awareness for those with kidney disease

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By ALISSA RASCHKE

In 2004, Mary Schlereth went through her worst nightmare. She lost her boyfriend, Craig Johnson, in a motorcycle accident.

But even through her shock and grief, she saw hope. She decided to have Johnson's organs donated to patients in need.

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Mary Schlereth of the National Kidney Foundation lost her boyfriend, Craig Johnson, four years ago in an accident. Oliver Rosario received his kidney and pancreas. They have since become friends.

(Photo for The Doings by Terence Guider-Shaw)

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A quilt, created in memory of organ donors, is displayed at the National Kidney Foundation of Illinois event, Living with Transplantation, at the Marriott Oak Brook Saturday. More than 340 transplant recipients, donors, friends and family attended.

(Photo for The Doings by Terence Guider-Shaw)

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Four years later, Schlereth is still reaching out to both donors and recipients through the National Kidney Foundation of Illinois, where she works as the donor awareness program associate.

Schlereth coordinated Living With Transplantation Saturday at the Marriott Oak Brook. The event offered lectures about recent medical advancements, help with planning a healthy diet and a chance to gain inspiration from recipients who are thriving.

Schlereth, a former teacher, became involved with the foundation first as a volunteer. Helping others gave her a sense of comfort. It was through her volunteer work that she found a new career -- and met one of the people her boyfriend's organs had saved.

He had given up

Oliver Rosario has had diabetes since he was 14. At 30, he suffered a stroke. A year later, he discovered his kidneys were failing. The formerly active father of four, the primary breadwinner of his household, began

undergoing dialysis. He had to leave his job in construction, and with medical bills and family expenses piling up, he began to lose hope.

"I was ready to die," he said. "I wasn't going to go home and not take care of my family."

But through Schlereth's decision to donate her boyfriend's organs, Rosario's life was saved. He received one of Johnson's kidneys and his pancreas, and though it took a few days for the new organs to take, he is now doing fine. He and his family are back on their feet.

"I sent my oldest daughter to college this year," he said.

Schlereth was able to see first-hand how her decision had changed Rosario's life. The two met through the Gift of Hope Foundation and began a friendship. Events like the one Saturday give the two of them a chance to catch up and share their story with others in need of organ transplants.

"What Mary did was give my children a father," Rosario said.

For Schlereth, knowing her loved one saved lives doesn't completely erase the pain, but it has inspired her to know that life does go on.

"Craig wasn't able to accomplish the dreams that he had," she said. "But he has given life to people to accomplish theirs, and that's great to know."

Excruciating wait

But for every patient who receives a transplant, many more stay on the list. For Brigid Halama and her brother, Mike Brookhart, optimism is the only way to endure the wait. Polycystic kidney disease runs in their family. The two lost their father to the hereditary disease a few years ago.

Brookhart is awaiting his third transplant. One of his previous transplants had come from Halama's husband.

"It's the most humbling thing to know that someone was willing to give that gift," he said.

For Brookhart, the wait will be longer than it will for his sister, who also has the disease.

"I know I might have a five-year wait, and I'm 'clean,' " Halama said, referring to the fact that she's healthy and hasn't already had a transplant.

Brookhart will need a perfect match, and even then the outcome may be questionable.

"I'm optimistic," he said. "I have to look at other options."

Bouncing back

With so many transplants needed, part of the foundation's purpose is to raise awareness about becoming a donor. Not all transplants need to be the result of fatalities. The kidney donation process has made major strides, and is a nearly painless process, transplant nurse and donor Doug Penrod said.

Penrod underwent surgery April 3 to donate his kidney to a complete stranger. Through that process, he also played a key role in coordinating a four-way transplant at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. Penrod heard of three other people who were willing to give their kidneys to members of their own families, but those family members were not a match. Penrod, who didn't care who received his kidney, worked with all of the families to allow everyone in need to find a matching kidney.

His generous gift led to three additional patients getting the organs they needed.

Penrod's recovery time was short. His surgery was on a Thursday, and by Saturday he was driving to the grocery store, he said.

"Two weeks later, I think I look pretty damn good," he joked.