

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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The Gift of Life BY ROBERT KIENER

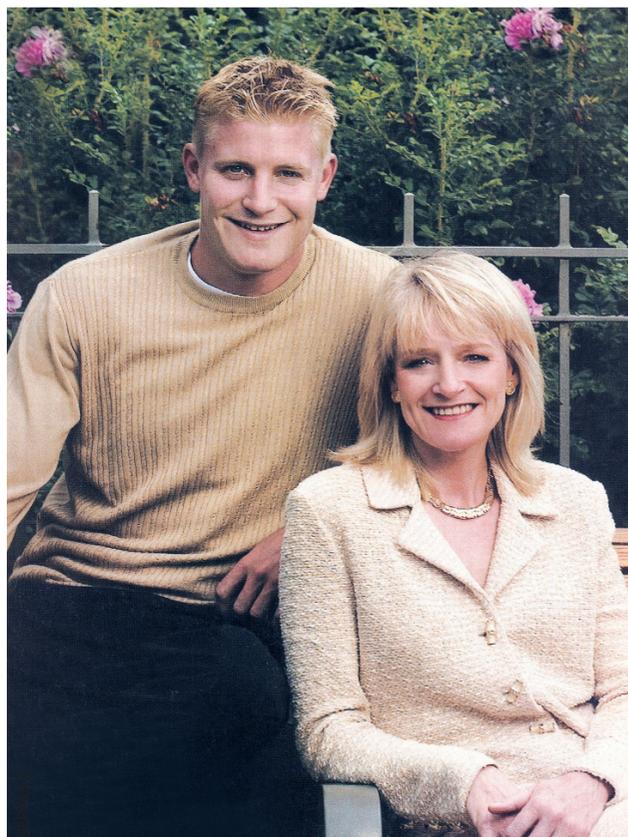


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Diane Craig and her son, Kenny believe that each one of us should give the gift of life.

called to the telephone. Someone from her office was calling to say that Sandrine had been in a school-bus accident. Diane rushed to the airport to catch the next flight back to Ottawa. Waiting for the plane, she phoned Dr. David Creery, a pediatric critical care specialist at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario. He had devastating news: Sandrine was in intensive care, unconscious, with severe brain trauma.



Sandrine Craig

Just after nine the next morning, Dr. Creery walked into the ICU's small conference room and greeted Diane and her son Kenny, 16, who had flown in from Calgary. Exhaustive tests, he explained, had shown no improvement. Sandrine was brain-dead and would never recover.

Hesitant, deeply aware of Diane's private grief, Dr. Creery asked, "Have you thought about..."

Diane finished his sentence for him, "...donating Sandrine's organs?" Two months earlier, when renewing her driver's licence, Diane had received a brochure about organ donation and a donor card. Intrigued, she had skimmed both and set them aside. Now, as she thought about her dying daughter, she remembered the card and thought, *How can I bury a beating heart or breathing lungs?*

Kenny agreed instantly. "Mom," he said, "it's the right thing to do." Twelve hours later Diane, Kenny and a circle of friends gathered around Sandrine's hospital bed for the last time. They offered a prayer and bid private farewells to their "little angel."

Diane Craig's generosity changed—and saved—lives. A chronically ill eight-month-old baby, whose parents had already planned the infant's funeral, received part of Sandrine's liver. Her heart and lungs were transplanted into the chest of a 34-year-old woman who had suffered heart problems since birth. Two teenagers each received a kidney, and Sandrine's corneas restored sight to a baby and an older woman. Diane received a number of anonymous thank-you letters reporting on the improvements the donations made in the recipients' lives.

Diane Craig's story is inspiring but, sadly, not typical. Canada's rate of organ donation is one of the lowest among developed countries. "There is a critical shortage of donated organs across the country," explains Dr. Heather Ross, medical director of the Cardiac Transplantation Program at the Toronto General Hospital and president of the Canadian Society of Transplantation. Last year 250 people on official waiting lists died while hoping for a transplant.

There are 28 hospitals across Canada that perform organ transplants. "We have the expertise to save more lives, but the organs aren't available," says Dr. Eugene Bereza, director of the Medical Ethics Program at McGill University and chairman of the Canadian Medical Association's Committee on Ethics. "It is a tragedy for everyone."

A major reason there is a shortage of transplantable organs is that the relatives of people who have died simply haven't been asked. "Some physicians forget to consider organ and tissue donation with a brain-dead patient or wrongly assume that the potential donor's family is too distressed to be approached," explains Dr. Christopher Doig, associate professor of critical care medicine at the University of Calgary. It is the hope of Reader's Digest and the Canadian Medical Association that doctors will be encouraged to ask about organ donation when they see a signed donor card like the ones we've included with this article.

Several myths about organ donation need debunking. Although many people believe their religion will not allow organ donations, virtually all major religions support it as a humanitarian act. Also, transplant doctors do not become involved until all efforts have been made to save a patient's life, the patient has been declared brain-dead, and consent for organ and tissue donation has been confirmed.

The donation process takes about 24 hours and the body is then released to the family for funeral arrangements. Incisions from surgery are carefully sewn up, so an open-casket funeral is possible. Health coverage includes organ donation, so there is no financial burden to donor families.

There is no upper age limit for potential donors—the oldest Canadian organ donor was over 90, but someone teenage or younger will need the consent of a parent or legal guardian. Transplantable organs include the heart, lungs, kidneys, liver, bowel, pancreas and stomach.

Tissues include corneas, hear: valves, bone, skin, tendons and ligaments. Until more Canadians agree to donate, and doctors become more consistent about asking families for a loved one's organs, seriously ill people will continue to die unnecessarily. "We can't go on like this," says Diane Craig, "We are burying the cure."

This article has been edited and condensed

How to Donate

Did you know that donating your organs can give up to eight desperately ill people a new chance at life, and that donating your tissues can save up to 50? But you have to indicate your wishes.

Sign and carry an organ and tissue donor card like the ones we've provided, or register your consent through your provincial registry (go to www.rd.ca for a list). Because hospitals will not remove any organ without a relative's consent, discuss your desire to donate with close family members. For more information, call your provincial health ministry, provincial transplant society, or go to: www.giftoflife.on.ca/en/