

## **Sharing Gifts of a Lifetime**

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My life changed forever on March 21, 2003. My cousin was born with a severe heart defect, which took his life two short years later, while waiting for a heart transplant. During those two years, I spent a significant amount of time caring for him and also started nursing school. I knew at that point that I wanted to be a PICU nurse. Two years after he passed, I graduated and got my dream job. During my time in the PICU, I have had the privilege to care for several donation cases. They have become a passion and a favorite of mine. It is one area where I feel that the nurse has a huge impact on the outcome. It also hits close to home, making it even more important to me.

I have witnessed several different situations while seeing families through a donation. Some disconnect themselves completely and leave before the child passes. Others have been there until the last possible moment. One situation in particular was much more involved than others. After caring for the child for a couple of weeks it was deemed he was a potential donor. I placed a late night call to the Wisconsin Donor Network (WDN) and a representative came out to see the family at midnight. Due to some unfortunate miscommunication and misrepresentation, the family became completely opposed to donation. Since I was familiar with the family and their beliefs, they opened up to me and told me why. I truly felt that if they had a better representation of what the WDN is and does, they would feel differently about their choice. I asked my supervisor if I could stay into the day shift in order to spend more time with the family. I was allowed to stay and once the new WDN rep showed up, we sat down with the family again and started from scratch. After two hours and a lot of emotions coming to the surface from the family, the WDN rep and I, consent was signed. It was never (and should never be) forced on them. They were elated that I would have gone through so much effort to advocate for their family. They say it is the hardest, but best decision they have ever made, a "chance in a lifetime". Once consent was signed, they asked if I would still be coming back that night to take care of their child, since I had stayed late that day to "take care of them". I told them, "Absolutely". At that moment, they said that they were completely comfortable with their decision and the hands that he would be in that night. They said their goodbyes when I returned and left him to me. It made me proud that they would trust me with their beliefs and most of all, their child in his last hours. In the morning, five people had their new organs, an entire family became huge advocates for organ and tissue donation, and I could not have been happier.

Prior to and since this donation, I have been involved in several successful donations, along with many organ recipients. I have also taken on the role of solid organ transplant resource on our unit. I look forward to learning more about the process and what else I can do to advocate for donation to the families that are facing an end-of-life situation of a loved one.

I believe organ donation is a collaboration of every person who enters that room. It takes nurses, doctors, therapists, WDN staff, and a strong family to be successful. As a nurse, I am there to help manage the patient to make them the best donor candidate that they can be. In the process, I also need to be a comforter and reassurance for the family, a resource for the WDN staff who may not be familiar with our facility, and an example for the family, a resource for the WDN staff who may not be familiar with our facility and example for fellow staff members. I feel that these patients should receive the utmost respect and be treated with dignity, not just "spare parts". If it were not for the unfortunate loss of these patients, so many more people would not even have a chance of life, so let us treat them like miracles.