

My Journey with OPO

by Christin Strong, RN

2013 Joan Heimler Legacy of Life Scholarship Award Recipient

My first experience with the UW Hospitals and Clinics Organ Procurement Organization (OPO) was when I was 18 years old. I was a CNA working on a Medical/Surgical unit, and was working with only my second dying patient. The man was elderly, and wanted to be an organ donor. He was deemed eligible to donate his corneas, and I was tasked with icing his face until someone could come for the enucleation. Four years later, as a Student Nurse, I came in late one night to observe my preceptor perform an eye enucleation on a patient who was killed in a car accident. She explained the whole process as she went along, and the Tissue Bank was on the road coming to recover tissue for further donation. As she explained the process, I began to understand better the good that this strange process could affect. I saw this poor life, ended too soon, give all it had left to affect others. I was in awe.

I graduated, and began work as an RN, first on the same Medical/Surgical unit, and then in the ICU. In the ICU I had more opportunities to work with OPO and even with families to facilitate donation of tissue or eyes on one or two occasions. I learned from seasoned nurses how to gently approach this sensitive topic. Then organ donation became very real and close to home for me. My cousin and my husband's cousin were both killed in tragic motor vehicle accidents 2 months apart from each other. We were with my husband's aunt as the OPO staff came and wheeled her daughter away to save a handful of lives with one final unselfish act from this sweet girl. My cousin was an organ donor as well, and both sets of parents expressed the healing properties of the organ donation process. They expressed how it gave them strength to know that even in this loss there was meaning; that these precious lives weren't lost in vain, but saved multiple lives as their final act. I could see the families' perspectives, and it made me more compassionate, and helped me focus on the hope but remember the loss.

Shortly after these tragedies I was hired for a role in my hospital requiring training as a Designated Requestor. Among other things, I learned what a first-person designation was, and the importance of discussing your wishes with your family. With this fresh in my mind, I was floated to a partner hospital for a chance to bolster skills that were high risk, but low use in my department. The patient I was assigned to had a traumatic head injury, and was dying. His mother stated he wished to be a donor, and with a GCS of 3, we contacted OPO and found him to be a donor, registered as a first-person designee. We worked with the family and OPO to set up his donation. I was able to be a support nurse, using the example from my training and work with other nurses.

These opportunities have made me more aware and proactive in my work with dying patients. I feel this is part of my calling as a nurse. I help these families find meaning in the loss of their family member. I make the connection between the patient and OPO, and stand as their advocate when family is unsure what to do. I've learned to say "Your family member wanted to be a donor, and I'm here to help you with that," rather than "Do you want to talk about organ donation?" I'm now part of the group in my hospital that promotes organ donation, both in our hospital, and in the surrounding communities. I have assisted with community health fairs where we encourage the community members to sign up for first-person designation. We explain what donation is, how it works, and the affect it can have. Our goal is to increase awareness in our communities, and the number of first-person designees. I am proud to be a part of this group, and look forward to continued work with OPO and their mission of hope.