

Organ Transplant Awareness Program,
2018 Organ Donation Scholarship

The Liver We Waited For

Organ Donation: A Personal
Story

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I was four years old when I first became aware of how organ donation can save lives. Unfortunately, my personal story did not end with a happy-ever-after, but it begins and ends with a strong-willed woman who will always be an inspiration to me, Bernadette Louise Martinez.

In February of 2004, I lost my Aunt Bernadette because the transplant she had hoped for and the one our entire family prayed for never came. In 1991, my aunt was diagnosed with a congenital liver disease, she was 25 years old. For the first few years after the diagnosis, she coped with the symptoms and managed her doctor appointments. She was compliant with all her medications, some of which made her tired, upset her stomach and altered her mentation so I've been told. This woman tended to her family's needs by working full time until the effects of medication and chronic pancreatitis kept her home. She seemed to love everyone, especially her elderly parents, tending to their day-to-day needs at the expense of her own.

As time went on, Bernadette went to her doctor appointments and was slowly moving up the liver transplant list. Taking note of her position, she prayed that she would have a donor before the disease would finally take her. Our hopes and aspirations are sometimes dictated by things beyond our control. My dad opened up the paper one Sunday morning in 2002, reading the sports page then the front page. He could not help but notice that one of the headlines proclaimed the suspension of the liver transplant program at the University of New Mexico (UNM). As luck would have it, Bernadette had just had visited with her doctor at UNM and was told that her liver was failing that she was no longer be a candidate for even a partial transplant. She needed a liver, period. My dad called his brother, Bernadette's husband and informed them of what he just read. To say they were disappointed would be an understatement. Since the

transplant program at UNM was no longer an option, she had to be seen in Colorado and be placed at the bottom of the transplant list. This was devastating news for her and the whole family, I was too young to understand, but I remember the family's angst.

My aunt is also my Godmother, I've always been close to her. I was young, but I remember as I would take naps with her that she always seemed to lack energy. She was so ashen, an indicator of liver failure, often trying to hide her skin color with makeup foundation and a little lip stick on her beautiful lips so that no one would notice. Little did she know, no one seemed to care. To see her smile and to hear her laughter fill up a room was her gift. Watching her live life like nothing was the matter is something we can all learn from.

She was in and out of hospitals in the last two years of her life often suffering from debilitating pancreatitis. On February 16, 2004, two days after her daughter's birthday, she passed away suddenly while making lunch, adding to an already tragic situation. People say that time is all that we own, that is until we run out it. I think back, and I could not help but wonder if she would still be with us if someone had just taken the time to sign-up to be an organ donor, if organ donation was more accessible in rural states like New Mexico.

It is kind of sad that she would have to benefit from another's misfortune. However, those who are brave enough to sign themselves up for the program when they apply for a driver's license, recognize how important it is to save lives and offer hope. I'm 17 years old and I'm a driver which stresses my dad out quite a bit. I went with him for my license, I was so excited that I almost failed the written test! When it was time to take my photo I knew it was a rite of passage, a responsibility not to take for granted. That special day, I came to another realization--

that I would be signing up to be an organ donor. My aunt would have been so proud of me and I think of her each time I get behind the wheel. I can hear the echo of her laughter, I can feel her zest for life.