

The Gift of Life

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Personal Essay

The world works in a mysterious way; we are all unique, yet an unseen force connects us all. Miracles come in many different forms. In the case of my family, a tragedy became a miracle. A young girl lost her life in a car accident, but in the process, she saved my father's life. Because of her decision to become an organ donor, my dad was able to enjoy another 16 years of life with his friends and family, and was able to continue helping the people of Albuquerque.

My father, Brian K. Snow, served the Albuquerque community proudly. He was involved with law enforcement in New Mexico for over thirty years, nine of which were spent on Albuquerque's original S.W.A.T. team. After so many years spent on the force, he was naturally a fighter. He battled to reduce crime in Albuquerque, and he fought to stave off a disease that threatened to end his life. My dad has three children: Megan, the oldest, Kasey, the middle, and me, the youngest. Shortly after I was born in 1997, my dad was diagnosed with primary sclerosing cholangitis, a potentially fatal liver disease. Doctors suggested that he begin the process to become a liver transplant candidate, with the idea that by the time an organ became available, he would still be healthy and strong enough to have a good outcome.

As it turned out, my dad's disease progressed far more rapidly than anticipated, and by the time he went onto the United Network for Organ Sharing database, he was in and out of the hospital with gastric bleeding and other issues. By the end of 1998, he was on a feeding tube, losing weight rapidly, and was extremely jaundiced and fatigued. The need for a donor liver was becoming dire.

The holiday season came and went, and no donor organ became available. On Jan. 9, 1999, my father was waiting to be discharged from University of New Mexico Hospital, knowing that he was basically being sent home to die. His surgeon, Bijan Eghtesad, came to his room, looked him in the eye, and said, "Brian, a suitable organ has become available, but there's

a woman down the hall who is sicker than you are, and I need to give it to her.” Still, he wouldn’t let my dad go home. We later learned that the liver came from a 14-year-old girl who had been the only survivor of a violent, DWI-related crash in which she was a passenger. Sometime before, she had told her parents that she wanted to be an organ donor, and when she was declared brain dead, her parents agreed to honor that wish.

Many anguishing hours later, Dr. Eghtesad returned to my dad’s room and said, “Unfortunately, the woman in whom we tried to transplant that liver had too much scar tissue, and we couldn’t make it work. We had to close her up again and send her home.” It was, once again, a heart-wrenching combination of sorrow for the woman and her family but hope for my dad.

After a difficult 12-hour procedure, my dad’s transplant was completed. Doctors and family members waited all the next day for him to “wake up” when the transplanted liver began functioning. It never happened that day. But the next day, my mom walked into my dad’s room and found him chatting animatedly with his mother. A few months after the transplant, my parents wrote to the donor family through New Mexico Donor Services and told them how grateful they were for that young girl’s decision to be a donor, for her decision to share that information with her family, and for their willingness to honor her wishes.

For the next 16 years, my dad had very few complications from his liver transplant. He was diligent about taking his medications and taking care of himself, having monthly blood draws and working closely with his doctors. He walked my sister Kasey down the aisle to marry the love of her life, J.P. He celebrated when my sister Megan married her wonderful partner, Jen. He loved helping me on my journey through Sandia Prep, beginning in 6th grade, and tried to

never miss a single one of my baseball games. I always felt so fortunate to have my dad supporting me in every way. He told me frequently how proud of me he was, and we were tight.

Over Halloween weekend 2014, he and I drove to a baseball tournament in Las Vegas, NV. He didn't feel well most of the trip, and when we returned, he went to urgent care to see what was going on. Doctors thought it might be his appendix and scheduled surgery to remove it the following morning. During surgery, they discovered that my dad had stage 4 cancer of the appendix, with tumors growing throughout his abdominal cavity. Two days later, he went back to work, determined not to let the cancer take over his life and to battle it as best he could. He didn't talk much about his diagnosis; he simply told family and friends that he was at peace because of the 16 years that he'd been given to spend with my mom and to see his three children grow up. Three weeks later, he passed away.

At my dad's funeral, we all wore Donate Life pins and wrist bands, and we asked the hundreds of people who attended to contribute to New Mexico Donor Services. My band broke, but I still have it tied to my backpack, where I carry it every day as a reminder of what a gift we all were given because of my dad's donor. Everyone in my family is a registered organ donor, and we share our story whenever we have the chance.

As I prepare to graduate high school and head to Augsburg College in Minneapolis, where I will continue to play baseball, I think about what an incredible impact organ donation has had on my life. I plan to go into law enforcement when I graduate from college, so that like my dad, I can serve my community. And I plan to continue to spread the word about organ donation as well, because it was a miracle that changed my life and allowed me to grow up with a father whose love I will forever cherish.