

## Organ donors on rise

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If the proverbial genie granted Lucille Soulliere three wishes, she would first ask to hear the beating of her son's heart again.

It's the heart that saved someone else's life after Robbie Sheehan's ended unexpectedly at age 19. Soulliere said she would love to meet the man or woman who received it.

"The one thing I wish for is to go up to that person, put my hand on their chest and feel my son's heart again," the Belle River woman said in an interview Monday.

When Soulliere made the bittersweet decision to donate Sheehan's organs in 1999, there wasn't as much awareness about the process, she said. But that has changed dramatically, according to the Trillium Gift of Life Network, Ontario's organ donation agency, which announced Monday that a record number of organ transplants occurred last year in Ontario.

At a news conference in Toronto, president and CEO of TGLN Frank Markel said more than 600 transplants took place with organs from deceased donors in 2007. Still, more than 1,600 Ontarians remain on waiting lists for organ transplants, making it "critical" for people to talk to their loved ones about their wishes in case of death, Markel said.

In Windsor, 24 people are currently waiting for an organ transplant, according to the TGLN. In the Windsor-Essex region, 33 organ transplants -- the majority of them involving kidneys -- took place in 2007, said Hotel-Dieu Grace Hospital's organ and tissue donation co-ordinator Paula Schmidt.

A new provincial program that will reimburse living organ donors for their travel, accommodation, parking and meal expenses, as well as provide a loss of income subsidy, was also announced Monday. Ontario Health Minister George Smitherman said Queen's Park will contribute \$500,000 annually to help donors cover their expenses. The program took effect this month, but anyone who has donated an organ since Aug. 3, 2007 is eligible.

Living donors are usually family members or close friends of the recipient. Living kidney donation is the most common and successful of all transplant procedures, according to TGLN. It is also possible to transplant a part of the liver, lung, small bowel and pancreas from a living donor.



CREDIT: Nick Brancaccio, Windsor Star  
A MOTHER'S HEART-WRENCHING GIFT OF LIFE: special quilt: Pat Bially, left, and Lucille Soulliere display a butterfly quilt Monday made by the mother of an organ transplant recipient. Bially and Soulliere are mothers of two organ donors who lost their lives at a young age.



CREDIT: Nick Brancaccio, Windsor Star  
TEAM: Organ donation walk team members Vlad Krndija, left, Tom Awad, Dennis Segatto, Pat Bially, Lucille Soulliere, Debbie Cobby and Lynn Tetler gather Monday to prepare for the Gift of Life Relay from London to Windsor starting Thursday. Krndija, Awad, Segatto, Cobby and Tetler are organ recipients while Bially and Soulliere are mothers of sons who donated organs.



When Vlad Krndija talks about the ultimate gift he received from his mother Mirjana -- who gave up one of her kidneys to end his dependence on an exhausting dialysis routine -- tears still well up in his eyes.

The Windsor resident was 29 when he received the transplant in 2002, after being diagnosed with permanent kidney damage in 1993. Today, Krndija is in good health and able to live a normal life. He and Mirjana mark the anniversary of the transplant each May by spending time alone together over dinner.

"What my mom did was incredible," he said.

Dennis Segatto, another Windsor resident who received kidneys from unknown donors, touted the advancements in medicine, as well as increased education and awareness about organ donation over the years.

"We've come a long way," he said. "(Organ donation) is prolonging people's lives and helping people live better."

For Soulliere, finding comfort in her son's organ donations also meant finding new friends with similar experiences. She and Pat Bially, another Belle River resident who lost her son and subsequently agreed to donate his organs, struck up a friendship after meeting at an organ donation awareness event.

Bially's son Chris was 34 when he was declared brain dead following a medical emergency, leaving behind two young children. Bially and her husband Jim made the decision to donate his heart, liver and both kidneys. The organs were harvested on Christmas Day 2004, giving four families "the best Christmas gift," Bially said.

Unlike Soulliere, Bially knows something about the person who received Chris's heart. She's a 63-year-old woman who was near death at the time of the transplant, done in Edmonton. On the first Mother's Day after the transplant, the woman anonymously sent Bially a thank-you card.

"She wrote: 'Thank you for giving me another Mother's Day,'" Bially recalled tearfully.

Today, Soulliere and Bially keep their sons' memories alive by participating in events that help educate people about organ and tissue donation and raise money for the cause.

#### EVENT DETAILS

The Gift of Life Relay this week is a major fundraising and organ donation awareness event. The walk will begin in London on Thursday and end in Windsor on Sunday. Proceeds will benefit the 2008 Canadian Transplant Games in Windsor, to be held between Aug. 4 - 9. Another event, Run Under the Sun, will be held in Windsor on Sunday, starting and ending at the Sun Life Financial building on 8255 Anchor Dr. Visit [www.wrace.org](http://www.wrace.org) to pre-register.

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