

Walk strikes close to home for organ donor's family



The Lavis family includes, in front, from left, Ann Carroll and pet Shady, John Lavis, Jayne Lavis and Kaitlan Lavis. In back are, from left, Jen Lavis, Justin Carroll, Dan Lavis and Kurtis Lavis.

April 28, 2008 12:49 PM - Ann Carroll can't fathom why organ donation rates are so low in Canada.

Why aren't people signing donor cards? What are they afraid of?

The Mississauga woman and her family know a lot about organ donation.

Thirteen years ago, Carroll's father received a life-saving heart transplant and, the same year, her mother died while waiting for a new kidney.

Last year, Carroll's oldest brother, Jay, 48, was killed in a work-related accident in Orangeville. Eight people benefitted from his decision to donate his organs, including a heart recipient, who later wrote the family to thank them for giving her new life, said Carroll.

On Saturday, Carroll's brother, Dan Lavis, who lives in Ingersoll, walked along Dundas St. W. in Mississauga en route to Toronto, where the Gift of Life Walk, which began Thursday in London, concluded on Sunday. It also marked the end of Organ Donor Awareness Week.

The goal was to increase awareness about organ and tissue donation and to pay tribute to organ donors and their families.

For Carroll's family, the journey began in 1995.

"We were a family of immense gratitude. Our 62-year-old dad, John, father of four, grandfather to three children and husband to Joan received the biggest gift he will ever receive — his life was given back to him," said Carroll. John Lavis was in desperate need of a heart because his own did not survive a triple by-pass. He was placed on a temporary artificial heart, which bridges patients to transplant. Eight days later, his new heart arrived, and it was a perfect fit.

Since then, her father has seen many wonderful things, said Carroll. He witnessed the addition of another grandchild, helped build a golf course and took a trip to the top of the Rocky Mountains.

As wonderful as that outcome was for Carroll and her family, there was an equally devastating side.

Six months prior to her dad receiving his new heart, his wife, Joan, suffered an aneurysm that left her with kidney complications. She was placed on dialysis, but her health declined, and she died while waiting for a kidney donor.

Dan Lavis decided to get involved in the walk last year as he left the hospital where his brother had just died. On his car radio, he learned that a Gift of Life Walk was taking place. He sped along highways until he met the walker, and then laced up his own shoes to take part, walking 15 kilometres that day.

This year, he kept up a healthy pace of 45 kilometres per day.

"It was really satisfying," he said as he made his way through Mississauga.

Lavis was joined last Thursday by Carroll and her two sons, Justin, 13, and Jackson, 8, who walked the first few kilometres.

"It's the anniversary of Jay's death, and what better way to celebrate (his life) than to participate in this walk," said Carroll, who added that more people should be celebrating successful organ donations than praying for a phone call that never comes.

Carroll said everyone in her family has signed donor cards and that her wish is for Canadians everywhere to follow suit.

Unfortunately, she said, that's not the case.

However, people can change that by becoming donors, she said. It's as simple as informing OHIP, either when renewing your health card or by visiting www.giftoflife.com.

According to Trillium Gift of Life Network, as many as 80 people can benefit from one donor. Currently, 1,678 people in Ontario are on the organ donor waiting list.

Furthermore, numbers show, Canada has one of the worst donor rates among industrialized countries: about 13 donors per million people, compared with 20 per million in the U.S. and more than 31 per million in Spain.

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