

One Life, Many Gifts

[Start of recorded material]

Female Student: Like, when you're young you don't think, oh, I'm gonna die tomorrow.

Male Student: Because I don't plan on dying any time soon and it's just not something on my mind very much, so why....

Male Student: Yeah, they don't really talk about it in high school 'cause...

Female Student: It is kind of a morbid subject, right. It, it's... you're talking about dying and, you know, you don't talk about your funeral with your friends.

Male Student: I told my mom once and she was like, we don't talk about that.

Female Student: Young people, they don't think anything's gonna happen, so what if you needed it [00.00.30] tomorrow and you didn't... like, nobody donated to you, like how would you feel?

Male Student: That's a good point.

Male Student: Like you're gonna be naked in your open casket. Realistically it has to start at high school or even in public school. Do you also know that if your kid died... like, it's such a waste of a life, but if you donate their organs then you can...

Male Student: Yeah, someone else's life you save.

Male Student: Like multiple people, like you can give, like a kidney here, a kidney there, a liver.

Male Student: A heart.

Male Student: Liver here or a heart there, like even [00.01.00] corneas.

Male Student: Well, I'm sure your parents would like, respect your wishes that you wanted to donate your organs if you went and died.

Male Student: No, but that's why you have to talk to them, make sure they know that you made the choice, make sure they know why you made the choice.

Male Student: Exactly, yeah.

Jaynel White: I've heard about it but I've never really been like, yeah, organ donations, everybody should be involved, until I lived it and until my dad passed away.

Rizwana Ramzanali: Because I never thought my life would be where it is, you know. It's just... I was 19 when I developed high blood pressure and my physician told me [00.01.30] that it was because of the diabetes and the effects of it. And by the age of 23 I developed retinopathy, which is an eye disease ... that can lead to blindness.

Emile Therien: And then at that time Christopher and his wife, you know, it really hit me like a ton of bricks... Yeah, that was his only sister, you know, and I think the response ... and it was just phenomenal. And when she died I was... there were a thousand people at her funeral.

Janet Brady: You know, I had the world right in my [00.02.00] hand and it just came shattering down to... you are dying.

Brandon Gibson: They'd asked me why I took those pills and some of them even asked if I was dying. And I remember going home one day and asking my mom, am I gonna die, and my mom just kind of looked at me and... [sighs].

Janet Brady: If you don't see a liver transplant before Christmas of next year, you won't see Christmas.

Lucas Belisario: Pale and non-active, like in bed all the time, I won't be able to do things I'll be able to do [00.02.30] now. I might still be at the hospital. I don't know for sure, but...

Jaynel White: He was [laughs].... You know, people say, you know, you're gonna get over it, it's gonna be okay, you cope. It's not okay [sniffs], it never will be okay. Me and my dad had a very good relationship. He was probably like the funniest person I know [crying]. Well [sniffs], we used to sit in the car [00.03.00] and we'd talk and then he'd just be a goof and he'd be like, you know, how we'd end conversations; one of us always had to have the last say, so it was kind of yeah, okay, yeah, okay, whatever. Just we'd go back and forth for like, two minutes straight.

It was probably about a week before Christmas or so, he didn't feel very well, he was having trouble sleeping and breathing at night and they just kind of gave him pills to take. And they said he'd be fine but he was having chest pains and just wasn't feeling well. And he went back and I guess the nurse stopped [00.03.30] the doctors from sending him home again and said there's something seriously wrong with him, so...

Janet Brady: It was tough. You never forget being told that you're dying and that you need this transplant. I worried about who was gonna brush my daughter's hair every morning. Anyone who's a mother knows that the worst thing is to leave your children and possibly leave them without their mom.

And I was reading the [00.04.00] bedtime story to Kyle and at the end he said, could you die? So he hadn't been listening to the story. And I said, I could, there is a chance but there's also a bigger chance that I'm gonna live, that I'm gonna be better than I am now.

Emile Therien: In 1998.

Female Student: Yeah.

Emile Therien: Yeah, oh, that's a great picture.

Female Student: And here she is, a bridesmaid.

Emile Therien: Well, my wife, [00.04.30] Beth, we've been married 40 years plus. We have a son, Christopher, and we had a daughter, Sarah. And Sarah died in June of 2006. She died of sudden cardiac death. She had, I guess, you know, she was at home early on a Sunday morning and her friend, Derek, was here.

And she just, I guess, collapsed, passed out, and they rushed her to the hospital. It came out of nowhere because she was never sick. She was very active; she was tall and lean and did the right things. Prior to [00.05.00] a couple of weeks before she died she had headaches and we didn't think it was serious and neither did she. But she an appointment to see a doctor and of course the appointment was, you know, long after she died, so...

Narrator: Sarah's extremely rare heart defect could have been found with a routine ECG but no one would have known to even look for it.

Emile Therien: It would not have been fair on her to keep her on life support, you know, and we had that option to say, you know, doing... But midway through the week we realized, you know, it's the worst-case scenario, you're gonna lose [00.05.30] your kid.

Narrator: After days of clinging to the hope for a miracle, Emile and Beth finally made the heartbreaking decision to take their beloved Sarah off life support. She died at 3 pm on a Saturday. But it was what had happened just before this that to this day leaves Sarah's family speechless and so proud. Two minutes from her life made all the difference in dealing with her death. [00.06.00]

Emile Therien: After a few days we... I mentioned that we were visiting our son down in New Jersey and we were leaving and Sarah came over. Then she was going through something in her purse and she took this card out. And I was in here reading and my wife was there, and Sarah said, pulled out a card and said, mum, I just wanted you to know in case something happens. So it was just like I was, I don't know.

That first day with Sarah, I mean they... right after Sarah's death the kidneys were given to [00.06.30] two men, a 60-year-old and a 30-year-old, and they, it saved their life. And then one went home on the Monday and one within another week, so they're gone, you know. They were... and then her corneas were taken and given to a senior citizen and, and a... a young woman and they were joyful. So I think, you know, in death it's... it's a great memory, you know, and it really sustained us through.

Lucas Belisario: I remember I played for one year before I got sick.

Lucas's Mother: Has he been to a farm? Has he eaten any hamburgers lately [00.07.00]? You know, has he had any unpasteurised cider? And they started asking us these questions and started to scare us a bit. And they found blood in his urine and the blood tests started to come back and they admitted him that night.

Narrator: The E. coli bacteria had somehow entered little five-year-old Lucas's body.

Lucas's Mother: I think about 20 transfusions when he was at Mac, so they did surgery and they put a permanent dialysis tube in him so that he could get up and move around. And he had a tube in his abdomen. And we brought him home and we did what we call peritoneal dialysis [00.07.30], and he did that for 11 hours that night and he went to school in the day. And then he had about an hour treatment after school as well.

I was talking to him at the time, thank God, and he just stopped responding to me. It was in the morning, about seven o'clock. And he was lying on the bed looking at me and he stopped talking to me and his eyes were open and I said, Lucas, Lucas. And I lifted his head and it flopped back down again and after that I don't know. I must have called the nurses' station; they all, everybody came in from everywhere. They come — I don't know if you've ever [00.08.00] been on for a Code Blue but it's like hundreds of people come from everywhere and they throw you out of the room and...

Lucas Belisario: Well, my old secretary at my school told Tom, our, his, her husband, about me, 'cause I had kidney problems, and he said that I guess he would see if his kidneys were matching. They did, so we did like blood transfusion to see if they would match, and they did so we, we went with the [00.08.30] operation.

Narrator: To nine-year-old Lucas it was just that simple; a complete stranger, husband of the school secretary, had just offered to have his own kidney removed and transplanted into Lucas's body.

Tom Mildenberger: An article in the paper a few weeks earlier about a lady who donated, who's unrelated and donated to a little boy, and I was reading it on the kitchen table and then I said to Terese, you know, I could do this. And then this opportunity [00.09.00] came up and I really vividly remember saying to Terese, I could do this too.

And I think that was... I don't know but maybe it was fate that this then came up, my chance, you know, to help this boy and... you know, I've heard that you can live fine with one kidney. So... and the chance of something going wrong was just so slim that I'll take the chance. And then I kind of... [00.09.30] could see myself in their shoes and it was my boy, you know, I would hope that somebody would come forward and...

Lucas's Mother: Tom matched perfectly [laughs]. Honest to God, we couldn't believe it. When we found out, it was like the percentages were... everything was just unbelievable. It was pushed right through. So I had so many medical staff at Sick Kids in Toronto coming up and asking us, is this true, did you not know this guy and, you know, is this really happening [00.10.00]. Nobody could really believe that it was, that it was all happening. It was so amazing.

Receptionist: Hello, Trillium Gift of Life Network, Jean [?] speaking.

Clare Payne: The coordination is crucial because you need to get all of the teams in at the same time and all of the recipients ready at the same time.

Frank Markel: We're the keeper of the waiting lists. Any person who needs a transplant in Ontario, their physician has to register them with us. We maintain the waiting lists. We work with the transplant [10.30.00] doctors to set the rules for who gets an organ first.

Narrator: Members of the transplant team meet weekly to review the patient cases and determine who will go on the waiting list.

Doctor: Every transplant specialist would tell you that he or she is privileged to be part of one of the greatest undertakings in modern medicine.

Michael: Transplant Coordination, it's Michael. So Toronto's been offered the lungs.

Receptionist: It's a female, okay.

Michael: The heart's going to Ottawa, yeah, liver for us and... okay, they're just... [00.11.00]

Dr Bill Wall: This wonderful life-saving, life-enhancing treatment that makes people well again. It takes people who are close to death and restores them to good, normal life. It's the only example in surgery where surgery, the surgery of transplantation, is entirely dependent upon human compassion. It doesn't [00.11.30] happen unless someone chooses to donate organs.

Surgeon: And that'll clear up, showing that the kidney is flushing.

Rizwana Ramzanali: Finally my physician told me, he said, Rizwana, your kidneys are failing and you're going to need dialysis. He suggested I go see a dialysis unit but I wasn't ready to do that. I connected it with, you know, being hooked up to a machine, losing all my independence and like just to stay alive I have to get hooked up. So I didn't want to do that.

Narrator: Just one week later.

Rizwana Ramzanali: I woke [00.12.00] my husband up and I said, you know, I think I'm having a heart attack 'cause I have this pain in my chest and it's shooting down my left arm; I think we need to call the paramedics. The next thing I remember was I was in the emergency and a nephrologist was telling my husband that my kidneys had failed.

Narrator: The dialysis that Rizwana had dreaded was the only thing that would now save her life.

Rizwana Ramzanali: It was really hard and so I faced death every day. It was like, oh God, you know, what if I'm not able to make it to the hospital [00.12.30] on time.

Doctor: There's a tragic irony today. There's never been a better time to get a transplant; the results of transplantation have never been superior to what they are today. But at the same time, there's never been a worse time to be on an organ transplant waiting list. The numbers waiting have never been greater; the duration of waiting has never been longer and the chance of dying while waiting has never been higher than it is today. [00.13.00] And that's because of the lack of donated organs.

Jaynel White: They told us, well, your dad needs a new heart because he has an enlarged heart and I never saw an enlarged heart until one day and they're huge [laughs].

Narrator: Jaynel's dad was on the transplant list waiting for that heart for two months.

Jaynel White: I think he had his doubts sometimes. There were days where he was doubting, but there were days when he was like, no, I'm

gonna do this. He was... he's so strong, like [laughs] he [crying], [00.13.30] he only cried when he [inaudible]. Not once did he ever say to me, [sniffs] I'm not gonna make it.

Brandon Gibson: No one explained to me that without a transplant I would have had maybe a year, a year and a half, two years left.

Narrator: Brandon has cystic fibrosis and the only thing that would save his life was a double-lung transplant.

Brandon Gibson: So breathing complications got worse. I was admitted to the hospital [00.14.00] maybe every six to eight weeks and I was probably at the hospital more than I was actually at home. And even playing hockey outside, I would play for maybe half an hour and then have to rest for like the rest of the night. So it wore me down a lot; just working so hard to breathe wore my body down. It was just kind of weird growing up being that left-out kid that couldn't do anything.

Narrator: Brandon explains what it's like to have CF.

Brandon Gibson: Well, I explained to them how [00.14.30] you breathe through a straw for 60 seconds and after that you kind of get what it's like to be in my shoes, 'cause a lot of people can't even do it for 60 seconds 'cause they're so breathless afterwards. And that's what I'm like all the time. You want to be able to do everything you can but you can't; you're limited to a lot of stuff 'cause you just... your lungs can't handle it.

Narrator: The hardest thing for any parent is to watch your child slowly die.

Brandon Gibson: I was so scared and that will be one of [00.15.00] the moments where I thought like, why does this have to happen to me?

Narrator: After seven years undergoing dialysis three times a week at the hospital and a lifetime of battling diabetes, Rizwana got the news.

Rizwana Ramzanali: Dr Luke came in and he said to me, we are ready for you. And I called my husband again and I said can you please come because I need you. And I was all on my own in my, in my room. I think that's when things sunk in, really. It... you know, I mean it's a moment you've waited for [00.15.30] and it wasn't the transplant itself that, you know, was on my mind, it was the family; someone's life had been lost and it... it broke my heart that despite the grief, their grief, they were giving me... they had made the decision to donate the organs of their loved one.

And because of that, their decision, I was going to get my life back. And it was such a desperate feeling. I really wanted to reach out to this family and let them know [00.16.00] that I cared. I just

wanted to be there and be there for them through their grief, but I couldn't do that. So I just... all I did was cry and pray.

Jaynel White: And I asked myself the same question, why, why hasn't he gotten a heart and other people have, or why haven't other people gotten it? I mean, basically you're waiting for somebody to die so that they can live, and that bothered me a lot because I don't, I don't want somebody to die to let my dad live but I want him to live. And I struggled with that.

Narrator: The heart they all so desperately waited for [00.16.30] never came.

Jaynel White: They say he was unconscious but it's [sniffs]... that he can maybe hear me. I told him I was proud of him [crying], told him I'm gonna do the best I could for him [sniffs]. I told him one day I'm gonna get my name heard for him, so. [00.17.00] I told him [sniffs] that one day we'd share a father-daughter dance; that was unfairly taken from us. Every girl will understand that one. And because [sniffs] it was something I dreamed about since I was a little girl and it was hard [00.17.30] to give that away [sniffs] and let that go.

Narrator: Instead of receiving his own life-saving organ, David White would ultimately become a donor himself, giving the gift of life to others.

Frank Markel: Four out of ten potential donors... we don't even have a chance because the family says no. That's a huge loss. And every donor, you know, could provide seven organs and I haven't even begun to talk to you about tissue, eyes, heart valves, bones [00.18.00], skin, enormous quality-of-life enhancement for people who are tissue recipients. One donor can provide tissue for up to 75 people and it's lost because the family says no. And most of the time they make that decision without really understanding.

Brandon Gibson: It was actually pretty hard because you live kind of in suspense, like you don't know when you're gonna get called for the transplant.

Narrator: The whole family jumping every time [00.18.30] the phone rings, praying it's a doctor on the other end with an organ match.

Brandon Gibson: I was just about to go to bed; it was about ten o'clock. And the phone rang and my dad answered it and I kind of heard, okay, we'll get down there as soon as possible. And he came running upstairs and said it's time for your transplant. And I go, oh, so I, we went down to the hospital and we waited about six hours. I tried to sleep as much as I could and [00.19.00] they called me back down and said it's a go. That was one of the first times I've

ever seen my mom cry... I love you and we'll be here when everything goes good... and you're out.

Narrator: Both Brandon and Lucas were given their second chance at life. Organ recipients all and always share one thing: the deepest respect and appreciation to their donor and donor family. Words cannot express their gratitude.

Tom Mildenerger: We just talked about [00.19.30], you know, how Lucas is doing and, you know, everybody's thinking about us back home. And...

[Video of transplant games]

Narrator: World transplant recipients had all faced death and were now [00.20.00] celebrating life.

Female: Montreal, Canada.

[Video of transplant games]

Doctor: I know the boy who won the 100-metre dash with someone else's heart beating in his chest did it in 12.2 seconds.

Narrator: Children bonded with adults. Different cultures simply shook hands with an understanding smile. Tears were shed, awards [00.20.30] were won, hugs were plentiful. These people were thankful to be alive. Many didn't speak the same language, many didn't share political or religious views but the bond they all had was they were alive and doing so well. These games offer hope to the [00.21.00] thousands of people on organ waiting lists.

Emile Therien: I think I did what a lot of Canadian families would want for their...

Tom Mildenerger: I've had some looks and last week I mentioned to a few people and just the look that I get from them, it makes me shocked too a little bit that they're so shocked.

Jaynel White: He lived, he loved and he laughed. And he lives on [laughs] and I think that's [00.21.30] incredible.

Doctor: There can be nothing better that a Canadian could do to help another Canadian.

Female Student: There's so much about it, it's not like you're sitting now like talking about youth, but don't I think a lot of them don't know either, like some do but I don't think my mom knows.

Female Student: No age I don't think is too young to make kids understand that they have the opportunity to save a life.

Male Student: Yeah, and it's just like...

Male Student: I still must talk to my parents and I still need to find out exactly what happens when you die or what happens...

Female Student: It's not up to you. If you die [00.22.00] you can't be like, oh, I want to donate my organs. It's up to your parents. All you have to do is talk to them.

Male Student: I think it has a lot to do with like, the age we're growing up in, like, we're becoming more and more open as a society to like, doing things for other people.

Jaynel White: So that people understand they have an option. It's not just you die and that's it.

Narrator: Yet Canada has one of the lowest organ-donation rates in the world, which is the reason many Canadians are dying on organ transplant waiting lists. We are far behind [00.22.30] many other countries.

Male Student: If we just reach out to like, high school kids, it's gonna be, oh, in 15 years we have like all these organs that like, right now people are dying, people need organs to...

[Overtalking]

Female Student: I think it's all about right right now is the popularity...

Doctor: Because the students are key to this. If we are going to change organ donation rates in this province and in this country, the students are the key to doing this. [00.23.00] It should become part of the Canadian fabric.

Frank Markel: We are putting our faith in the young generation, quite honestly. We know from what we've read that this is a very idealistic generation, these are doers, these are people who want to make a difference; they want to make the world a better place. And if they realize that agreeing to be an organ donor is one of the ways they can do that, we think they can accomplish remarkable things. Let's get to a point where if we say we're Canadians [00.23.30], people will say oh yes, you're the country with the best donor record in the world. And that's our goal, that's really where we'd like to get to.

Brandon Gibson: I've always like to maybe climb a mountain, maybe, with my dad or something, and before the transplant that was so, like, unrealistic. Now it's become a reality, any, like... the sky's the limit. I can really do anything I want to now.

Female Student: And like when I'm dead there's no reason [00.24.00] for me to have my organs and I'd rather have them go to somebody who needs them.

Female Student: After I heard about it I felt kind of like... that I need to be like, make other people more aware, because a lot of people I know don't, had no idea about this.

Male Student: Well, if it didn't affect how I function, then I would definitely consider giving up my kidney.

Brandon Gibson: One of the most important [00.24.30] things that we can talk about, instead of talking about sports why don't we talk about organ donation.

Janet Brady: Tell your family of your wishes.

Narrator: That's as easy as it is.

Janet Brady: That's it, takes two minutes.

Male Student: The thing is, like, I think we should just get it out there to the general population, not just us, because they, we need organs now and the more people who know about it, the more organs we'll have.

Female Student: But how do we...?

Male Student: No, I, I'm not scared to donate an organ if it's needed [00.25.00] somewhere else.

Female Student: I don't know, it's something that I've kind of just put off, but I think it's something that needs to be done now 'cause you never know what's gonna happen.

Narrator: This very minute more than 4,000 Canadians are waiting for an organ transplant.

Jaynel White: My dad gave his pancreas, his kidneys, his lungs, his eyes and I didn't want that because I said no, I love his eyes too much, his eyes made him. And my mom pulled me aside and said well why don't we give them up for donations because maybe one day [00.25.30] somebody'll watch you on that TV and see you because of his eyesight.

Male Student: I've definitely considered it but I don't know how to go about approaching my parents about it.

Male Student: Oh, just the amount of people that were waiting and the amount of people that are waiting to be on that waiting list, it's insane,

especially for this country where, you know, we're trying to help other countries outside of here and we can't even solve this problem within our own.

Male Student: I just don't want to leave it up to my parents to make that decision 'cause I know it's my right. [00.26.00]

Narrator: The rest will continue to wait in hope.

Male Student: It will be something I'll be proud of, that I've saved someone's life.

Jaynel White: And I just didn't realize how powerful something like this can be and... I've had people come up to me saying, I signed my card. I said did you talk to your family, no, well go do that, then I'll be proud.

Doctor: And if the students come to understand it too, I'm absolutely convinced, I'm [00.26.30] absolutely convinced that our students will elevate the organ donation rate in this country to a level that we can all be proud of. It should be part of doing what is right.

Frank Markel: There are several ways you can register to be an organ tissue donor. When it's time for you to get an OPIP health card, that will help you register right there. When you get your [00.27.00] mailing about a driver's licence renewal there'll be a brochure in that package that will show you how to register. You can get it from our website, www.giftoflife.on.ca and you can download a form which you can print, fill it out and mail it to the government. We have a special website for young people. It's called recycleme.org. It's a great website; it's got all kinds of interesting information. You can download from there. [00.27.30]

Narrator: Please: let's talk about it.

[End]