

Advocate accepts award in name of anonymous hero who gave her life



By Brock Weir

Arlene Lindsay may have taken home the award, but she didn't accept it just for herself ? she also accepted it on behalf of a man she never got the chance to know but who nevertheless gave her the gift of life.

Ms. Lindsay, a long-time local advocate for organ donation, received an Advocates in Action Award last week from the Trillium Gift of Life Network, a non-profit agency of the Ontario Government to support organ and tissue donation across the Province.

?It was a great honour and it means our group, the York Region Gift of Life group, has worked really hard and we couldn't do it without them,? says Ms. Lindsay. ?Our group is made up of dedicated volunteer advocates, donor families, people waiting for transplants, living donors, transplant recipients and people who are just really interested in sharing the importance of organ and tissue donor awareness.?

Ms. Lindsay is a 25-year recipient of a liver donation.

When she was fresh out of high school, Ms. Lindsay was thrilled to get out into the world and start the job she had secured for herself the Monday after graduation.

?I wanted to get this new adventure started, but I never did get there,? she says. ?A few days before my job was about to begin, out of nowhere, the whites of my eyes were yellow, I had no energy, I was so weak, I couldn't even lift my head off the pillow. Even my urine was extremely bright and those are all signs of something not right inside.?

She was hospitalized for several weeks for what was thought to be hepatitis and a hospital stay was followed by several weeks of bed rest at home.

But life, as it does, continued on ? and in Arlene's case, it continued on normally for the next 20 years, bar a couple of hospital visits here and there.

She got a job, continued to work, married and had children, but over 30 years her disease ? properly diagnosed as autoimmune hepatitis ? progressed to the point where she needed a new liver.

?I was told I had to have a transplant or I was going to die,? she says. ?I was freaking out, I had never met a person who has had a transplant and I wasn't getting any better. I remember writing heartfelt letters of love and wishes for my kids in case I didn't make it

and that was really hard. But it has been 25 years since my liver transplant and, without it, I would never have met my fabulous grandchildren!?

All Ms. Lindsay knows about her donor, the man who made that possible, is that he was in his 40s with three young children, and that he lost his life in a car accident.

He probably didn't think much when he signed his name to his donor card, but today there is no doubt in Ms. Lindsay's mind ? ?He is my hero. Every day I am grateful for him.?

With this gratitude in mind, Ms. Lindsay has dedicated herself to the cause.

?Life really is precious and we should never take it for granted because this could happen to any man, woman or child,? she explains. ?There are over 1,500 people waiting for a transplant, including men, women and children. Everybody has the power to help make a difference. It is very simple: you take the cell phone in one hand, go to beadonor.ca, and take your health card in the other hand and within two minutes you're a donor.

?Some people think they are too old to register or that their organs aren't work giving to anybody. That is definitely not true because the oldest organ donor was over 90 years old and the oldest tissue donor was 102! That is amazing. It really works. There are some people who say transplants don't work, but I am living proof that it does ? and so are the rest of the people who are here today to talk about it.?

And talk about it she does, along with other members of York Region Gift of Life, who travel not only around York Region, but to various parts of the province through Trillium to share their stories, spread the word, and sign up potential heroes.

?Just do it,? she says. ?Don't put it off. Every three days someone dies waiting for an organ transplant. It is very, very important that we just don't say, yeah, we'll do it but to actually go in and do it. It takes two minutes to actually do it.

?One organ donor can save up to eight lives and enhance as many as 75 others through tissue donations. That says an awful lot. The most important thing to do is tell your family. It is important to discuss it and talk about it because we're all going to get there one day. I have a shirt that says, 'Please don't take your organs to heaven. Heaven knows we need them here.' We recycle everything else, why not parts of ourselves, if it is going to help somebody? You could be a hero!?