

Gift of Life Donor Program Leads the Nation in Organ Donors in 2013

Written by Australian Business

Sets new national record for donation because of the generosity of donors and their families

PHILADELPHIA, Jan. 13, 2014 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- Gift of Life Donor Program—the non-profit, federally designated organ procurement organization (OPO) serving the eastern half of Pennsylvania, southern New Jersey and Delaware—announced that the organization coordinated the recovery of 1,228 life-saving organs from 447 generous individuals in 2013—the highest number of organ donors ever recorded by an OPO in the U.S. Gift of Life is the only OPO in the country to have coordinated an average of more than 400 organ donors for each of the past eight years, making this region the most generous in the country for organ and tissue donation. Serving nearly 10.3 million people in the region, Gift of Life's coordination of nearly 43.4 donors-per-million-population ranks among the highest in the world, and speaks to the compassionate and giving spirit of the region.

"We are grateful to those individuals who made the generous decision to be organ and tissue donors, and to the families who gave others the precious gift of life during one of the most difficult times in their lives," said Gift of Life President and CEO Howard M. Nathan. "Much of the region's success is due to the strong support and commitment of our region's 130 hospitals and 16 transplant centers in ensuring that donation was offered to every family in a compassionate and positive manner."

Giving a "second chance at life" wouldn't be possible without the countless families who make the selfless decision each year to donate: Families like the Witmans. In April 2013, 26-year-old Bucks County, Pa.

, resident

Alan Witman

was involved in a devastating motorcycle accident, leaving him brain dead. In that moment of tragedy, his family talked to a Gift of Life representative about organ donation. "Our family had previously discussed organ donation, and we knew Alan wanted to be a donor," says his sister Lisa. "He was able to donate his heart, two kidneys and his liver. Making that decision has helped our family get through our grief. My brother saved four lives. That is his legacy and something we can be proud of."

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One organ donor can save the lives of up to eight people and additionally can also enhance the lives of up to 40 others through gifts of tissue, cornea and bone donations. In 2013, which marked the 20th anniversary for Gift of Life's tissue recovery program, the program coordinated 2,529 tissue donors, whose gifts may benefit up to 75,000 people. This important number includes bone donors, whose gifts have repaired fractures and prevented amputations; donors whose much-needed skin donations have healed burn patients; and selfless donors whose heart valves have repaired life-threatening defects. In addition, the Gift of Life Eye Bank facilitated 375 cornea transplants; its highest number ever, during its 10th anniversary year.

These remarkable gifts have given individuals like Jim Fry, a 5th grade teacher from Fleetwood, Pa., a second chance at life. Jim, who received a new heart and liver just over a year ago, was born with a heart condition called hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. It kept him on the sidelines of life since middle school and worsened as he moved through his 20s and 30s. Medication for his condition damaged his liver, requiring that it be replaced as well. Since his transplant, Fry has returned to work and says the best part of his new life is being able to participate in physical activities with his two young sons – activities that used to be impossible for him.

During 2013, Gift of Life Family House—a 30-room "home away from home" that provides temporary lodging and support services to family members and transplant patients receiving care in the Philadelphia region—provided 7,419 nights of lodging, served more than 29,000 home-cooked meals through the Home Cook Heroes program and provided 1,374 trips to and from area hospitals. The Family House is the first OPO-operated facility of its kind and was opened to help people like Bob and Judy Wertz of Middleburg, Pa.

In 2007, Bob contracted an infection that severely damaged his lungs. His condition worsened over the years to the point where he couldn't make it to the mailbox without stopping and resting. Without a transplant, doctors said he might not live through this winter. Fortunately, Bob received a new right lung in November 2013. While he recovered in the hospital, Judy stayed at the Family House. Bob also spent time at the house after he was discharged from the hospital. Both praise the facility, saying that "you come to the house as strangers and immediately become family with the other guests." Today, Bob feels like a new man and marvels at his new-found energy. Says Judi, "I got my husband back."

Among its many accomplishments in 2013, Gift of Life Institute, a global leader in donation education, trained hundreds of donation professionals in family communication and authorization through its partnership with the Australian Organ and Tissue Donation Authority,

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resulting in a 29% increase in organ donation in Australia. The National Transplantation Pregnancy Registry (NTPR), the longest-running voluntary registry tracking the outcomes of thousands of pregnancies in solid organ transplant recipients in the world, moved its operations to the Institute in 2013 as well.

Recognized as a national leader in organ and tissue donation, Gift of Life will mark its 40th anniversary in 2014 and has coordinated more than 36,000 organ transplants and an estimated 500,000 tissue transplants since 1974. And yet the organization's work is far from done. Today, more than 6,400 men, women and children locally—and over 120,000 nationally—are still in desperate need of a life-saving transplant. At Gift of Life, one of the keys to success is the commitment and dedication of all of the partners in the organ and tissue recovery system, and the community. Together, we will continue to bring the gift of life to many more people in 2014.

Gift of Life Donor Program encourages those who want to make the commitment to donate to register online at www.donors1.org. For more information on organ and tissue donation, please call Gift of Life at 1-800-DONORS-1 (1-800-366-6771) or visit at www.donors1.org

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