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Gift of Life Reaches Milestone for 2006 With 401 Donors

1,131 organs were transplanted because of the generosity of donors and their families

PHILADELPHIA – Until the very end, anti-violence advocate Kevin Johnson looked to help others and lead by example, all from the wheelchair he used following his own encounter with gun violence three years ago. The last act from this heroic 22-year-old Philadelphian was perhaps his most generous, donating his organs to those seeking life-saving transplants.

Patti Miletta, of northeast Pennsylvania, considers her recovery a miracle, after receiving a heart transplant just two months ago. Miletta was diagnosed three and a half years ago with an enlarged heart – the very same condition that took her mother’s life 21 years ago. After more than two years of treatments, doctors placed her on the heart transplant waiting list and held out hope, even while she endured a sharp decline in health. Her second chance for life arrived on Oct. 24.

These two stories, among hundreds throughout eastern Pennsylvania, southern New Jersey and Delaware, illustrate the sheer importance of organ and tissue donation. Gift of Life Donor Program has worked for 33 years to promote and facilitate donation, and 2006 proved to be its most successful year.

Gift of Life closed 2006 with a significant milestone – coordinating 401 donors over the course of the past year. The accomplishment came about through the generosity of those donors and their family members who looked past their own tragedies and chose to save or enhance someone’s life.

In 1999, Gift of Life led the nation as the first organ procurement organization (OPO) to coordinate 300 donors in one year, and now it continues as a national leader being one of two OPOs to top 400. Because of those 401 donors, 1,131 organs were transplanted, providing a second chance at life to many. In 2006, Gift of Life also coordinated 1,307 cornea recoveries, 630 bone recoveries and countless other tissue recoveries that will greatly improve the life of thousands of tissue recipients.

“With all that is going on in our society, there is so much good that people are doing for their neighbors,” Gift of Life President and CEO Howard M. Nathan said. “Organ and tissue donation is an unparalleled example of the caring in our community.”

“I’m very proud of our staff, and the partnerships with hospitals that have been cultivated over the years. But I’m really proud of our community who have helped others through donation.”

Kevin and Patti were two of the thousands in the Gift of Life community who were a part of this important milestone. The success is aided by the support of our 150 hospital partners, those clinicians who have dedicated themselves to giving families the opportunity to turn a tragedy into a life-saving donation. Twenty of those hospitals received special accommodations from the Department of Health and Human Services in November. Dr. Kenneth Moritsugu, Deputy Surgeon General and a husband and father of donors, presented the hospitals with DHHS Medals of Honor for achieving a conversion rate of 75 percent in a 12-month period.

The Departments of Transportation in Delaware and Pennsylvania also assisted Gift of Life's efforts by making it easier than ever for residents to be donors. An online portal in those two states now give people the chance to support organ and tissue donation by adding the donor designation through the PennDOT or Delaware DMV Web site, instead of waiting for a new driver's license.

Gift of Life volunteers also played a significant role in showing just how important organ and tissue donation is to the community. In June, 115 of those success stories traveled to Louisville, KY to participate in the Transplant Games, giving transplant recipients a chance to illustrate their new lease on life and show their thanks to donor families.

Since 1994 – the year Pennsylvania's Act 102 that helped regulate donation was enacted – the number of donors has nearly doubled, from 208 that year to last year's 401. But Gift of Life's collective work is far from complete, and 2007 will see a continued focus on more lives being saved. As of last month, 5,067 people in Gift of Life's service region still await organ transplants while 93,699 patients remain on the transplant waiting list nationwide.

Since 1974, Gift of Life has served as the link between donors and patients awaiting life-saving transplants in the eastern half of Pennsylvania, southern New Jersey and Delaware. In that tenure, the OPO has coordinated more than 25,000 life-saving organ transplants and hundreds of thousand tissue transplants. For more information on organ and tissue donation, please call the Gift of Life Donor Program at 1-800-DONORS-1 (1-800-366-6771) or visit our Web site at www.donors1.org.