



# The Gift of Organ Donation

By Jennifer Jaeger Traynham

Photography by Sara V Photography

On June 17, 2009, Chris and Jenni Balck received life-changing news. Their 2 month old baby girl, Brooke, was diagnosed with Dilated Cardiomyopathy, a condition in which the heart becomes weakened and enlarged, and therefore cannot pump blood efficiently. As far as the prognosis, they were told repeatedly that 1/3 of the people who have this condition get better, 1/3 stay the same, and 1/3 get worse.

Brooke had lived at home for 2 years on multiple medications before her health took a turn for the worse and she needed to go on the transplant list. Once she was listed for a transplant, they lived for 75 days in a Pediatric ICU waiting for a family, in their time of unimaginable grief, to make the decision to save Brooke's life. While they waited, the Balcks met several other families also waiting for organs for their children. Sadly, some babies and children did not live to see their dreams realized. According to the Donate Life website, "an average of 18 people die each day from the lack of available organs for transplant, [and while] 90% of Americans say they support donation, only 30% know the essential steps to take to be a donor."

As my friend Jenni waited on a new heart for Brooke, we spoke many times, but one conversation stands out in my mind. We were discussing the awkwardness of praying for a heart for Brooke, and I admitted feeling a little guilty and weird about wishing for this new heart. I knew something bad had to happen to someone else for Brooke to receive a heart, and I am not the type of person to ever wish bad things on others. Jenni quickly pointed out to me that accidents happen every day, and she only hopes that when they do, something good can come out of the tragedy. This can happen if the person or the person's family chooses to Donate Life. It was then that I was completely inspired to both share the information and stress the importance of organ donation.

First of all, it is very important to discuss your wish to donate with your family. I have always been confident in my choice to be an organ donor, but thinking about this option for my children or even discussing it with my husband or extended family had never really been something I considered. I'm sure you'll agree that thinking or talking about losing a loved one is awful, but after much thought, I have decided that not thinking or discussing these situations—and what to do if the unthinkable happens—could be even worse.

On my quest to help spread awareness of organ donation throughout Brooke's journey to receive a new heart, I reached out to local resources and met someone who shared her story with me. She introduced herself and said that she was, unfortunately, very familiar with the donation process. Her husband had passed away six years ago from a brain aneurism, and his organs were donated. She described her husband as being "perfectly healthy until he died." Her husband had always been very health-conscious. He was always concerned with the thought of a heart attack, so was sure to eat healthy and take precautions against getting sick. In fact, he was planning on "treating himself" to a full body scan for his 50th birthday, because he was curious of what was really going on in his body, and wanted to take all necessary precautions. One Sunday at the age of 48, her husband was relaxing at home when he began to feel dizzy and nauseous, then began vomiting. They immediately called an ambulance. By the time they reached Rideout Memorial Hospital, he had fallen into a coma, never to wake up again. Once the doctors explained her husband's condition, they asked about the possibility of him being a donor, which he was. They ended up transferring him to UC Davis to be sure that there wasn't any possibility of repairing the aneurism, and when they saw that there wasn't, they began making matches for people on transplant lists. As the family gathered to re-confirm their wishes to carry on with the donation



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process, his father stated, “Well, he didn’t like waste and we’re not going to waste him.”

Within a week of donating her husband’s organs, she received two letters. One was from the heart recipient and one from the recipient’s wife. It was an amazing feeling knowing that she had prevented another family from going through what she was experiencing. She says that donating his organs doesn’t make her feel better about his passing, but it does make her feel better knowing that another wife did not have to feel the pain of loss that she had experienced. Because of her husband’s death, other lives were saved and other loved ones were spared the pain of losing someone they loved.

She knew with complete confidence that this is what her husband would have wanted. They had talked about what their wishes were regarding death, and thoughts on organ donation. He had made the decision for himself, and she had carried out her husband’s wishes. That is where she finds peace.

Brooke received her new heart on August 18, 2011 at UCLA. Because of one family’s decision, Brooke received the most precious gift ever and has been given a second chance at life. Brooke did amazingly well post-transplant. She is a tough little 2 year old. She was walking around the PICU (with her sparkly purse and purple Toms) with only a small dose of Tylenol on the second day after the transplant and she went home from the hospital 8 days later. Although the Balcks have not met the donor family yet, they are eternally grateful to the family that so generously saved their daughter’s life. Without this gift, they would not be watching their little ballerina twirl around the living room until she drops, dizzy with laughter, or seeing Brooke and her brother, Billy, cuddle and sing together. Chris and Jenni take every moment to appreciate the wonders of modern medicine and the kindness of strangers.



In an effort to make something positive come out of this experience, the Balck family created a website to help promote organ donation awareness. You can now easily go to [www.brookesbigheart.com](http://www.brookesbigheart.com) and register to become an organ donor in less than 90 seconds.

As a good friend once pointed out to me, “No one here comes out alive.”

As harsh as it sounds, it’s true. What are your wishes? Although planning for the unthinkable may not be your first priority at this time, it could sure be helpful in the event that something were to happen. Take time to think about this for both yourself and your family.

## LEARN THE FACTS

Despite continuing efforts at public education, misconceptions and inaccuracies about donation persist. Learn these facts to help you better understand organ, eye, and tissue donation:

**Fact:** Anyone can be a potential donor regardless of age, race, or medical history.

**Fact:** All major religions in the United States support organ, eye, and tissue donation and see it as the final act of love and generosity toward others.

**Fact:** If you are sick or injured and admitted to the hospital, the number one priority is to save your life. Organ, eye, and tissue donation can only be considered after you are deceased.

**Fact:** When you are on the waiting list for an organ, what really counts is the severity of your illness, time spent waiting, blood type, and other important medical information, not your financial status or celebrity status.

**Fact:** An open casket funeral is possible for organ, eye and tissue donors. Through the entire donation process the body is treated with care, respect and dignity.

**Fact:** There is no cost to the donor or their family for organ or tissue donation.

[www.donatelifeamerica.org](http://www.donatelifeamerica.org)

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# *The Gift of Organ Donation*

## **Kelly Meyer, A Living Donor**

In 2006, I was laid up with a strained back, and a friend from my church brought my family dinner. As we talked, she revealed her mom's health issues. She said her mom suffered from kidney failure and that she was on a donor list. I questioned her further, asking about family members who could donate, and she explained that the only match was her aunt, but that she had high blood pressure. She also said that her mom was O negative and that it was a hard match. That night, I couldn't sleep. I just kept thinking about her, because I am O Negative. I went on to do some research on kidney donation and the risks as well as the benefit for the recipient. It was on my mind, in my thoughts every day. I prayed and asked God to reveal what this was about. Why did I have an overwhelming feeling that I was supposed to pursue this? Soon, I realized what I needed to do.

I contacted UC Davis and spoke with the person handling my friend's mother's case. She sent me all the information on the process along with a lab slip for blood work. I gave blood and urine samples at Blood Source and waited. Once they determined I was a match, I was scheduled for a psych evaluation as well as every test known to mankind. It was the most thorough physical I have ever undergone, because UC Davis wasn't going to let someone donate unless they are in excellent health. A team of surgeons looked over the case and determined that it was a "go," and I was scheduled for a pre-op date and surgery date.

I hadn't actually met the recipient until I was through the blood-typing process and beginning the physical portion. When we met, she really had reservations and as I remember she even said that she couldn't let me do this. I asked her what she planned to tell God when she died about turning down the miracle match that He sent her. I think it changed the way she looked at it. She is and will always be part of my family. God brought us together for a reason.



Photography by Samantha Prather Photography

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