



Neighbors You Should Know

Ellen Tuech and her son, Geoff

The family faced unspeakable tragedy but turned it into a gift of life for so many others

by Jenny Rose Spaudo

Longwood's Ellen Tuech smiles and fights back tears as she remembers her son, Geoff Wasden. She misses her boy and the life he always brought to any get-together. But she's proud that, even in death, he's giving the gift of life through organ, eye, and tissue donation. And now, she's sharing his legacy in the new book *Because of Organ Donation*, which features 25 stories of donors, recipients, and donor families compiled by author Brenda E. Cortez.

Geoff had been a registered donor since he first got his driver's license in high school. When he died by suicide at 19 years old on February 15, 2016, his donated heart valve saved a child's life, and his corneas gave two others the gift of sight. His tissue donation continues to this day and may eventually impact up to 75 lives or more according to OurLegacy (formerly TransLife, the organ procurement organization that serves east Central Florida).

Ellen thought Geoff's donation story ended there. But she was wrong. About a month after her son's death, OurLegacy sent Ellen a keepsake box with a hero's medal to honor Geoff. Soon after, through OurLegacy, she found Donor Family Circle, a group of people who understood what she was going through and were ready to support her through the grief.

"It was the beginning of this really awesome journey," Ellen recalls. "It helps me heal – to be able to keep Geoff's legacy alive while I'm volunteering and meeting with other donor families."

She still remembers the first event she attended with Donor Family Circle. It was eight months after Geoff died, and Ellen's emotions were still raw. At the event, one woman "came and sat next to me," she says. "She introduced herself and said she had lost her husband, and she took me under her wing that day. It was pretty incredible."

Ellen continues to volunteer with Donor Family Circle, helping them educate the community about organ and tissue donation. According to UNOS.org, nearly 108,000 people are currently



Ellen Tuech with her family, including a portrait of Geoff. Photo courtesy of Abi Burnett.

waiting for organ transplants in the United States. That number becomes less daunting only when you learn that one organ and tissue donor can save up to eight lives and help 75 more heal and regain mobility.

The process of becoming a registered donor is as simple as filling out a form at DonateLifeFlorida.org or checking a box the next time you visit the DMV or Tax Collector's office, but that doesn't mean it's always an easy decision. Janna Aboodi, OurLegacy's public-relations manager, says organ donation is a personal decision. If someone wants to become a donor, she recommends they register and talk about it with their loved ones.

"It's important to talk about organ, eye, and tissue donation with your family," Janna says. "Letting your family know your wishes is loving your family. A family can find comfort and peace in knowing their loved ones' wishes are being fulfilled."



NASCAR driver Joey Gase honored Geoff and fellow organ donor Justyn Meyer by featuring them on his car during a race at Daytona International Speedway in 2018.

That was the case with NASCAR driver Joey Gase. When he was 18, his mother passed away. Her decision to donate helped 66 people. Now, Joey is a vocal advocate for organ and tissue donation and honors his mother at nearly every race.

Recently, he honored Geoff, too. Joey’s race car featured photos of Geoff and another young donor named Justyn Meyer at the Daytona International Speedway Coca-Cola Firecracker 250 on July 6, 2018. The gesture reminded thousands of people at the event – and countless more watching on television – of the importance of donation.

“We got to enjoy this whole day behind-the-scenes at the race,” Ellen remembers. “We met the family and went to the drivers’ meeting. We were on the infield during the introductions and watched the race from the pit box. Geoff’s and Justyn’s pictures were on international TV as Joey Gase circled the track. So he was able to hopefully touch some lives that day.”

Geoff continues to touch lives as his mother tells his story on the *Geoff’s Legacy* Facebook page, where she raises awareness for suicide prevention and mental health. This August, to commemorate what would have been Geoff’s 25th birthday, she’s planning an event called Rock to Stop Suicide, which will feature several local bands, a silent auction, and exciting raffles – all to hopefully raise \$10,000 for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

It’s set to be quite an event. And once again, Geoff will be the life of the party – because he gave the gift of life to others.

To learn more about organ, eye, and tissue donation, visit DonateLifeFlorida.org

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