

Tissue Donation: Donor News Updates

Tissue Donor Program celebrates first anniversary

Written by Priscilla Turner, Northwest Tissue Center

Last November marked the first anniversary of an innovative WSP Tissue Donor Program that allows troopers and communications officers to play a significant role in helping both the grieving families of those who die in motor vehicle collisions, and patients in need of life-saving, life-enhancing tissue grafts and sight-restoring cornea transplants. The WSP Tissue Donor Program is very simple, giving troopers and communications officers the ability to notify donation agencies of traffic deaths through a referral service. With the permission of coroners and medical examiners, the Northwest Tissue Center and the Northwest Lions Eye Bank then offer the option of tissue and/or cornea donation to families.



Perhaps there is no better testimony to the program's value than the comfort 16-year-old Dylan West's cornea donations have given his mother, Blanche West. Dylan became the first WSP donor after he died in a motor vehicle collision in July, 2003. His corneas have restored sight to a 31-year-old woman and a 61-year-old-man.

"To know that a little bit of Dylan lives on to help someone else-what a gift for them but also what a gift for us," says Blanche. Her husband Tom Marshall, who would have become Dylan's stepfather, adds, "You're looking for a humanitarian channel to fall into. Everyone's compassion comes rolling out to you, and here is a way for you to return that compassion."

To date, the WSP Tissue Donation Program referrals have enabled 14 people to become tissue donors, aiding many patients and offering comfort to families. The program has also resulted in 29 cornea donations, giving more than 50 people the gift of sight. On average a tissue donor can help more than 25 people with medical problems ranging from orthopedic trauma or disease, life-threatening burns, or heart-valve disorders. Musculoskeletal grafts help surgeons restore patients' ability to function without constant pain or limping, and to resume daily activities that back, joint, bone, or tendon injuries and degenerative conditions prevented. Only severely burned patients require skin grafts, which are sometimes life-saving. Heart-valve replacements also offer patients new hope for life.

"The WSP program has been such a great asset to us and to the community," says Candy Wells, the Tissue Center's hospital services supervisor. "We are so grateful to the State Patrol for embracing this program and helping us in our mission. It's such a great service to patients in need of transplants and to surviving families and friends who would like to choose donation."

Detective Steve Stockwell, a 24-year State Patrol veteran who worked in Bremerton, started the WSP Tissue Donor Program after he saw the need for it firsthand. Though there were no established channels of communication with referral services to reach the Tissue Center or the Lions Eye Bank, Detective Stockwell persisted in finding a way to help a bereaved father act on his wish to donate after losing his son in a traffic collision. That was back in 2002. Since then Detective Stockwell created the program in conjunction with the donation agencies and WSP staff. The program has received national and international recognition. Several other states, including Idaho and Montana, are using the WSP Tissue Donation Program as a model. The Montana program started February 1.

"I'm proud of the way the Patrol has responded," says Detective Stockwell. "None of this would have been possible without support from so many people."

The WSP program is particularly important because it fills a gap for people whose family members die outside of hospitals. Though federal law requires hospitals to report deaths to donation agencies, no similar regulation exists for traffic fatality victims, who are never treated in a health-care institution.

Blanche West is grateful for that benefit. Caravanning with Dylan and Tom to go camping on an annual trip with friends near Shelton, she lived through every mother's worst nightmare. She lost sight of Dylan's car in her rearview mirror and soon after, saw EMTs heading in the opposite direction. It took several hours to cut Dylan from his car. But she stayed at the scene. Dylan's injuries were so extensive, he was not able to donate tissue, but when she learned of her option to donate his corneas, she immediately knew that is what her son would have wanted.

Like many 16-year-olds, Dylan had just bought his first car, and was proud to drive it. A 1986 Mazda RX-7, his mother was "not crazy about it, but he absolutely loved it." Dylan also loved talking to his "best friend" Nichole. He enjoyed snowboarding and was a "hard worker" at his father's produce stand. He had plans to start one of his own with a friend as soon as he could.

Blanche volunteers a favorite memory of her son. Dylan and his brother Tyler had already left to return to their father's house after celebrating what turned out to be Dylan's last Mother's Day with her. "Then I heard Dylan's car coming back up the driveway and he runs in and says, 'Oh Mom, I just wanted to tell you how much I love you.'"

"He was such a bright little light. He glowed, my little gift from God," she says.