

There is a beautiful headstone on a grave in Northern Iowa... Etched on the back is a French horn, and one of her favorite quotes, "I have fought a good fight, I have kept the faith." Etched on the front there is a beautiful picture of her in her volleyball uniform.

Last month there were flowers on her grave – the card read:

March 7, 2011

Happy Birthday Kari!

I was with your volleyball coach and your history teacher last weekend – they came out to climb with me & Katie & Tessa & Samara & Alex & 90 other people. Wendy & Kelly had some obligations, but they'll be back. I think you know what it means to me that they come out to remember you... That they come hundreds of miles to climb with me always reminds me how much they loved you. When I hug them, I'm always hugging them for both of us.

You would have been 28 today. In a month, I will have been breathing with your beautiful lungs for 11 years – it seems like forever, and it seems like yesterday. All of your friends are beautiful, and they are so precious to me – I can only imagine who you would have become. I know you would have been amazing – you will always be amazing to me. You and your family will be in my heart forever.

Love, Lungs & Laura

This is Kari... One night, a little over eleven years ago, this beautiful girl was having dinner with her family in Iowa. She was 17 years old... She was intelligent – she was a member of the National Honor Society. She was athletic – Kari was a star on her high school volleyball team. She was opinionated, stubborn, outspoken... And she had a smile that lit up the world.

At dinner, **Kari** brought up the topic of organ donation and without hesitation she said she did not understand why someone wouldn't want to help someone else when they were through with life here.

A couple of weeks later, Kari and her sister Lys were swapping driver's licenses – checking out each other's pictures. Her mom says Kari "jumped all over" Lys because she didn't have "organ donor" indicated on her license.

A few weeks after that, Kari's family had a tragic decision to make – **but Kari had already helped them with that decision**. At the most devastating moment in their lives, they reached out and saved my life. Kari brought her big, beautiful smile into my life on April 8, 2000 when she and her family gave me both of her lungs.

I think about it often – and I cannot imagine the pain they were experiencing, and the strength they gathered when they made the decision they made... I have a friend in New Jersey who has worked in this industry for a long while – on her blog titled "donorcycle", she wrote the most beautiful piece I've ever read about Kari... I want to read you a tiny excerpt that applies to so many of you here:

If Kari had lived her life exactly as she did, she would have left behind a legacy of love and happiness and **that would have been enough**. But Kari did one thing more. She had already told her parents that if she died, she wanted to be an organ donor. Sure, her parents probably thought, never thinking that they'd actually have to honor that request. But they did. When Kari died, someone had to approach that family and ask them, in the midst of their grief, to donate her organs and they, in the midst of their grief, said yes.

You would think that that would be an easy and straightforward decision. But her parents didn't have to say yes. There's also a possibility that her parents wouldn't have been asked. The road to requesting organ donation is more complicated than most may realize. The hospital may not have called in the referral to the organ procurement organization. They may have said to the family – there's nothing more to be done, let's just pull the plug and let her go. The nurses may have thought – what's the use, this patient is dead or going to die, and not been vigilant in maintaining her organ function. Instead, in those hours as Kari became brain dead, calls were made, support was provided, information was given **and a whole host of people, some of whom will never realize it**, made the organ donation happen. From many, to one, back to many, Kari's donation became like a stone thrown in a lake, the ripples carrying the legacy of her life farther and farther from its original impact.

A whole host of people, some of whom will never realize it... I love that line... She was talking about all of you.

Breathing with her lungs is beyond amazing – her beautiful smile is on my mind throughout the day, every single day... And I know that the coordination it took to make this happen is just incredible. From spreading awareness – planting seeds – helping others understand that organ donation is such a valuable act... From advocating donation in your hospitals or organizations and educating colleagues on the importance of donation... To the strength it takes to approach a family in such incredible grief, and guide them and help them and comfort them – to taking care of and maintaining Kari, even though she was not with us anymore, because **you knew** she could help others... to the coordination in quickly transporting that gift from the giver to the person who is facing losing everything...

Do you have any idea how it feels, after living almost 40 years with crappy, cystic fibrosis lungs, to breathe with beautiful, “**real**” lungs that were a gift from an incredible girl and an incredible family?!?! Do you know how it feels to stand in front of dozens of people who have a hand in delivering gifts like this – people who have a hand in saving lives like mine – who have a hand in fostering legacies like Kari’s?? I can tell you from personal experience, because I’m living it right now, at this very moment, that it feels amazingly wonderful to be able to thank you for what you do...

Gift of Hope trotted me out here today because I am a beneficiary of the work you do – I’m alive and thousands of us are alive because of your dedication and passion for this cause.
Thank you.