

You won't find this gift in a box wrapped in pretty paper with a bow on top. Yet, it's the best gift a person can give. Organ donation is the most precious gift a person could ever give—or receive.

On Friday April 7, 2000, the night before her junior prom, Kari Lorraine Westberg died suddenly from a subarachnoid brain hemorrhage. A subarachnoid hemorrhage is bleeding in the area between the brain and the thin tissues that cover the brain.

Kari's death affected many people. It was the most devastating thing that could happen to the people who loved this girl so dearly. But, it also affected many people in a positive way. How? Because of the strong views she had towards organ donation, she gave many people a wonderful gift, a gift of life.

At 17 years of age, Kari knew where she stood on the issue of organ donation. Kari was a fun, loving, free-spirited, stubborn and strong-willed teenage girl. She had more friends than anyone could count because she was pleasant and kind to everyone. She had a smile that could light up a room in an instant. She was athletic, and had a love and talent for volleyball that cannot be expressed.

One evening, about a month before she passed away, as Kari sat with her family at the dinner table she told them exactly how she felt about organ donation. Her comment was, "Why wouldn't you give someone else a chance to live if you couldn't anymore!?" In the next week, Kari saw her sister Lys's drivers license and "jumped all over her" when she saw that she did not have organ donor marked on it.

Because Kari had no doubt that she wanted to be a donor, she gave many gifts to many people after her death. Kari gave the gifts of her lungs, heart, pancreas, kidney, veins, liver and skin tissue. To the people who received these gifts, you can only imagine their gratitude.

While Kari was giving her gifts, Steve Ferkau was one of the lucky people who was able to receive one of Kari's gifts.

At the time Steve received Kari's lungs he was a 39 year old man living with the disease called Cystic Fibrosis. Cystic Fibrosis is a condition which develops from a recessive genetic disease causing the development of very thick mucus in the lungs.

Steve was diagnosed with this dreaded disease at the age of 13. In his mid 20's he had to have a collapsed lung fixed. Although he told himself he would not go through that again, he met his wife Laura a few years later and when it came time that he needed to fix another collapsed lung, he did.

Steve was put onto the transplant list in 1997. By this time he was on oxygen all day every day, took many different medicines, and had chest physical therapy which included pounding on his chest, two hours at a time, four times a day.

Within the three years that Steve was on the waiting transplant list he received four false alarms. When finally, on April 8th, 2000 he received a call, and this time it wasn't a false alarm. Steve received Kari's lungs that day. She saved his life.

Steve is now a 47 year old man who loves and lives life to the fullest and wants everyone to know how organ donation can change a life. He is in his 29th year of working for the Chicago Stock Exchange. He loves to work with a lung transplant support group and volunteers for the Gift of Hope and Iowa Donor Network. He has a love for speaking in front of groups of people, teaching them about organ donation, and telling them about Kari and how she affected his life.

This year in our country there are approximately 97,620 people on the waiting list for an organ donation. In 2007, in the months of January through November, 26,021 organs were transplanted. 20,210 of them came from deceased donors, while 5,811 of them were received from living donors.

Every 13 minutes a person is added to the waiting list. On average, 18 people die per day waiting for a transplant. In 2006, about 5,000 people died waiting for an organ. One donor can enhance the lives of up to 25 people!

This issue holds a place in my heart because Kari was my eldest brother Ryan's girlfriend from 8th grade until the time of her death. Kari was my role model. I wanted like nothing else to be like her when I got older. I'd like to think I have some of the same qualities she had. Because of her I know how important it is to tell people how you feel about something that is important to you. And because of her, I know that I want to be an organ donor.

Also, the past few months I have been in contact with Steve and know the other side of the story. I know how grateful he is every day that Kari was willing to let someone else use something that she couldn't anymore.

Kari's story is just one of many. But one story, saved more than one life. Kari alone saved more than one life, and her story could save many more. Infact, I know it has because it is so widely shared, and I feel that as I share this story, maybe I am helping to save people's lives too.

I ask you to consider a few questions. Why wouldn't you let someone "borrow" something from you that you no longer have any need for? Why not let them have a few extra years with their family and friends? If you were the one in need, wouldn't you want that gift?

I hope you to deeply consider these questions, and when you find the answers to them I hope they lead you to the conclusion of, "I want to be an organ donor so I can help other people too."

Organ donation is the most precious gift a person could ever give—or receive.