

Organ donors provide gifts of life to others

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Margaret Owen knew things might not go well with the cataract surgery on her left eye after her doctor commented to the nurse, "Look at all that scar tissue."

The Our Lady of Good Counsel parishioner had experienced several laser treatments on both eyes to combat glaucoma's effects, and had already had a cataract surgically removed from her right eye.

Her misgivings about the 1989 operation on her left eye proved true. The cornea was torn during the procedure. She was left with such poor vision, Owen recalled, that she could "look at people and I would see their faces, but I couldn't distinguish their features."

The former third-grade teacher also found it difficult to continue a number of activities.

"I couldn't read, I couldn't knit, I couldn't write," she said.

But in June, 1989, three months after her cornea was damaged, Owen received a cornea transplant. She can now see with no problems — a gift for which she is grateful.

"I probably would not be seeing out of my left eye now if somebody had not had the generosity to donate their cornea," Owen declared.

She is one of thousands of people who have benefited from the generosity of individuals — or families — who chose at death to make available tissue and organs for transplant.

In fact, 40,000 cornea transplants took place nationwide in 1991 alone.

And organ donation extends far beyond just corneas.

According to figures supplied by the Rochester Eye and Human Parts Bank, 9,250 kidneys, 2,568 livers, 530 pancreases and 191 lung transplants were performed in 1990. Heart transplants — front-page news in the 1960s — numbered 2,023. Combined heart/lung transplants totaled 52.

Many people, however, are still unaware or grow squeamish when the topic of organ donation comes up, acknowledged Linda Spear, executive director of the Rochester Eye and Human Parts Bank, 524 White Spruce Blvd., Rochester.

Among the common misconceptions people have is that organ donors are so scarred from the procedure that they cannot have open casket funerals; that donors have to pay large sums of money; that only young people can be donors; that doctors — upon discovering a patient is a potential donor — al-



Margaret Owen, a 1989 cornea transplant recipient, now volunteers with the Rochester Eye and Human Parts Bank as a speaker on the importance of organ donation.

Babette G. Augustin/Photo editor

legedly don't try as hard to save the patient's life.

But while these stories are all false, Spear observed, one truth remains concerning organ donation: more donors are needed.

As of January 8, 1992, for example, the United Network of Organ Sharing listed 19,406 people waiting for kidneys, 2,251 for hearts and 669 for lungs. People have died waiting for transplants because donors were not found quickly enough, the executive director reported.

"There's a chronic need for tissues," declared Spear, whose agency serves an eight-county region extending from Rochester to the Pennsylvania border.

Compounding the problem is the fact that organs and tissues have to be obtained quickly after a person has died. Most of the tissue cannot be stored for any length of time. In addition, such organs as livers and hearts can only be used when taken from a person who is brain dead, and whose body is being sustained by life-support systems — a situation that arises in only about one of every 100 deaths, Spear said.

Since speed is of the essence when organ donations take place, it is helpful for a person considering the procedure to talk it over with his or her family in advance and to register as a potential donor — not leaving the decision to family members at the time of the individual's death, Spear said.

"A family at the time of a tragedy may not be able to think about their fellow man," Spear noted. "They may not be thinking at all of organ donation."

Owen, for one, had never thought much about organ donation until it became a reality for her.

"I really didn't know what to expect," Owen recalled. "It's one of those things when something happens to you that you didn't expect, and you suddenly find dozens of people who underwent the same thing."

In fact, Owen said, she was so nervous about the impending operation that she even mentioned the procedure to her hairdresser. She was relieved, however, when her hairstylist commented matter-of-factly that the operation was fairly routine and that another regular customer had undergone the procedure.

Hearing those words from her hairdresser was reassuring, Owen said. She herself has since had opportunities to reassure other people, and even to spread the word about organ donation and the Rochester organ bank.

In fact, Owen now volunteers with the agency as one of its speakers by traveling to schools, businesses and groups that want to hear about organ donation. As a retiree, she said, she did not have the money to contribute financially, so she volunteers to do her part.

Getting the word out about organ donation is crucial, Spear emphasized.

Her organization registers the names of people who have agreed to be organ donors. But even though the agency's territory covers eight counties with a population of more than one million, only 70,000 people have signed up to be donors.

Being listed with the organization is helpful to doctors and family members, Spear noted. When a person dies, the doctor will often ask family members if they would like to make tissue and organs available for donation. If the person is listed with the bank — which is called whenever a person dies — the task is made easier for the doctors and families, and speeds up the process of providing the needed tissue and organs to others.

Individuals of almost any age can be registered donors, including school children, Spear noted. "Everybody should think about organ donation," she said, "because we all will have to face it whether we know it or not."

EDITORS' NOTE: Those interested in obtaining information about organ donation should contact: The Rochester Eye and Human Parts Bank, 524 White Spruce Blvd., Rochester, N.Y. 14623, or call 716/272-7890.

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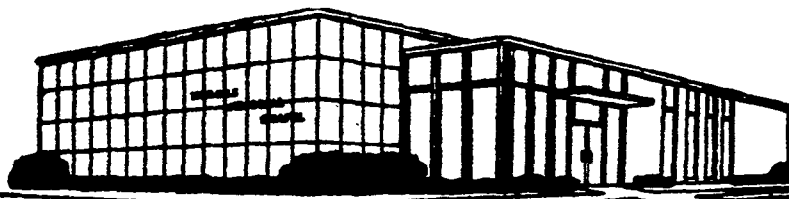
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