

# SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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## A MOTHER'S TRAGEDY OFFERS LIFE TO OTHERS AWAITING ORGAN DONATIONS

DALLAS — April 19, 1996 — It was a crisp, sunny January day, and the New Year seemed full of hope for Amy Cisneros and her 17-year-old son, Joe Richard Cantu.

But as night came, a nightmare began for the Grand Prairie woman. As the human-resources worker drove home that evening she wondered what her family wanted for dinner. She never got the chance to ask her son.

Later, as she chatted at home with a friend, her daughter rushed into the room with the news that Joe Richard had been shot in the head during a fight on a basketball court.

"The vigil finally ended the day after, when my son died," Cisneros said. "When I saw the chaplain coming toward me, I sensed the news wasn't good.

"It was right then that I told myself, 'If my son doesn't make it, I am going to donate his organs.' And that is what I did. I know how important it is to help other people in need. I had already lost my son, and I didn't want anybody else to lose a loved one if it could be prevented."

Because of her decision, at least two people — one in East Texas and the other in Abilene — got a second chance. In a matter of hours they received Joe Richard Cantu's kidneys.

The 17-year-old also helped ailing patients being treated by physicians at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas. The medical center has programs for kidney, pancreas, heart, lung and pediatric-liver transplantation, all with excellent patient and graft survival rates.

And through its Transplant Services Center, doctors help people needing tissues like skin, bone, bone marrow, tendons, blood vessels, corneas, cartilage and fascia, the fibrous tissue that covers muscles.

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"Organ and tissue donation is an essential step in the transplantation process," said Dr. Arthur Sagalowsky, professor of urology and holder of the Dr. Paul Peters Chair in Urology in Memory of Rumsey and Louis Strickland at UT Southwestern. "As transplantation of all types has become safer and more effective, more patients are candidates for life-saving or life-enhancing organ and tissue transplants."

Sagalowsky is one of the premier kidney transplant specialists at Parkland Memorial Hospital, the primary adult teaching hospital for UT Southwestern physicians and the place where Texas' first kidney transplant was performed more than 30 years ago. "We've performed more than 1,000 kidney transplants at the hospital since then," he said.

"One of the ironies of the success of transplantation is that the waiting lists are growing at a faster rate than organ and tissue donation," Sagalowsky said. "Increasing public awareness of the need and benefits of organ and tissue donation is the greatest practical challenge in the field of transplantation at this time."

"The entire donation and transplant process rightfully is based on public trust and altruism. Families are best able to accept organ donation at a time of personal grief and tragedy if they have been informed previously about the concepts of brain death, the fairness of organ and tissue allocation to waiting recipients, and the benefits of successful transplantation. Only when each of these educational goals is achieved, can we expect increased acceptance and participation by the general public in this important process."

The raw numbers of those needing organ transplants are staggering. According to the United Network for Organ Sharing's figures for last month, 44,905 people are on the waiting list. Topping the list are 31,560 people needing a kidney transplant. Some 5,940 are awaiting livers; 3,527 are awaiting hearts; 1,998 are awaiting lungs; and 1,276 are awaiting kidney-pancreas transplants.

In a study conducted in late 1994, organ-procurement experts found that a person dies every four hours waiting for an organ. They also learned that one in every three people waiting for a heart dies before one becomes available, and nearly three out of 10 people waiting for a liver will die before a liver becomes available.

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Participation will increase only if misconceptions are cleared up and more people understand what is involved in organ procurement, Sagalowsky said. For instance, some people object to organ donation because of religious beliefs, but there is no major religion that prohibits the donation of organs.

"Finally, we have to assure the public that everything medically possible will be done to save their family member," Sagalowsky said.

For Amy Cisneros there was no question about what to do. "When my son went to the basketball court with his friend, he didn't know that the friend had gotten into a fight earlier in the day. The guy the friend was fighting was at the court; the fight resumed; and my son came to his defense," she said. "My son literally laid down his life for his friend.

"He was a compassionate and very caring person, and he loved life. He often brought strangers home and offered them something to eat.

"And I know that this is what he would have wanted. Even though I didn't know it at the time, one of my daughters told me later that Joe Richard had once said he would donate his organs if he died.

"Even though I don't see him everyday in life, I know he's living through at least two other people, and it's not as final. Sometimes when my mind is idle I wonder how the woman and man with my son's kidneys are living."

**NOTE: April 21-27 is National Organ/Tissue Donor Awareness Week.**

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