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Gift of Life

DeKalb man's legacy lives on through organ recipient

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Brenda Tetzlaff and Margarita Noriega never met before Dec. 8.

The two mothers had communicated through letters for months. But on a frigid afternoon in early December, they gathered at the Noriegas' home in Elgin. The two burst into tears while they hugged each other, sharing two different pains - Margarita mourning her son and Brenda feeling guilty that she's alive.

Brenda Tetzlaff, 40, had been on dialysis for about three months before undergoing transplant surgery in April for her pancreas and kidney. Diabetes complications since age 15 had worn out her organs. Her donor was Luis Noriega, who was 25 when he died April 15 after being attacked the night before by three men outside Reilly's Bar and Eatery in DeKalb.

Noriega was a Kishwaukee College student and an assistant soccer coach at Indian Creek High School in Shabbona. He told his girlfriend, Callie Sears, a week before he died that he wanted to be a doctor. He always wanted to help people, Sears said.

Tetzlaff, of Waukesha, Wis., said she felt healthy for the first time in her life five weeks after she underwent the transplant.

"I spent so much of my life either at home or in a hospital," Tetzlaff said about a week before meeting the Noriegas. "I wanted to be part of my kids' lives. I felt guilty reading about Luis' death. Why am I going on when someone's murder allowed me to do so? But he saved my life."

Recipients and donor families rarely meet, especially within in a year of the death and surgery. But the Tetzlaffs and Noriegas were determined, even though addresses and phone numbers were blacked out in letters they wrote each other. Strict privacy laws protect organ recipients and donor families until both consent to have personal information exchanged.

"It's not as common as we would hope for these people to meet," said Kathy Schultz, senior marketing consultant for the University of Wisconsin-Madison Organ Procurement Organization. "It can take years to cope for the grieving donors' families and the recipients feeling that guilt."

Brenda and her husband Jason Tetzlaff met Luis Noriega's immediate family —Margarita; his father, Gilberto Sr.; brother, Gilberto Jr; sisters Sandy and Lauri; as well as Sears and close friend Jeremy Lorang. The Tetzlaffs gave the Noriegas a picture of themselves with their sons, Tyson, 8, and Trae, 6, a T-shirt from the hospital and a poem thanking the family for their sacrifice.

"Our son gave life," Gilberto Noriega Sr. said. "He helped somebody live."

Heart of Gold

The first major family event without Luis was Sandy's 24th birthday in November - a difficult feat for a woman who had done "everything" with her older brother.

Friends and family described Luis Noriega as generous, kind and funny. Pictures of him smiling adorn the walls of the Noriegas' living room. Lu, as they called him, combined his love of sports with a desire to help people as a soccer coach, when he wasn't working at Reilly's or studying.

On annual family vacations to Guanajuato, Mexico, Luis and Sandy would walk into the downtown area of the city. He would

give all his money to homeless people, Sandy said.

"If I was really upset, he would do so much to make me laugh," Sandy said. "Even if I told him to leave me alone. He'd make funny voices or sing along to ridiculous songs."

She remembered Luis would pull up his shorts, exposing his thighs, to get a laugh. They went out to bars in the DeKalb and Sycamore area, and traveled to Chicago together to see his favorite baseball team, the White Sox, play. Last Christmas, Luis put off paying his rent so he and Sears could sponsor a family for Christmas, Lorang said.

"The guy had a heart of gold, he'd drop anything for anybody," Lorang said. "It's been a roller coaster, emotionally. ... When things like this happen, I ask why."

Second Chance

Brenda Tetzlaff was familiar with hospitals. An asthmatic youth susceptible to allergy attacks, she was prescribed steroids for breathing problems up until age 15. Three months later, she was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes.

Doctors told her a strict diet and insulin shots would keep her blood sugar balanced — advice she didn't always take to heart, leading to even more trips to the emergency room. She eventually followed doctors' advice.

After Brenda and Jason got married, they adopted Tyson and Trae at birth rather than risk damage to her kidneys from pregnancy. Yet she still suffered.

In 1996, she underwent nine separate surgeries to stop blood vessels from breaking behind her eyes — a painful process where large needles are stuck behind the eyes, followed by use of a laser to cauterize the tissue. In following years she started losing feeling in her hands and feet — an early sign of kidney failure.

"I was looking forward to turning 40 last February," Brenda Tetzlaff said. "For my birthday, I was put on dialysis."

In early January, doctors told her she had fluid retained from her feet up to her shoulders. A month later a catheter was surgically implanted into her chest, so she could be hooked up three times a week to a machine that would filter her blood as her kidneys were meant to do. The four-hour process left her drained. She stopped working and could rarely play with her sons.

"It was very hard on my kids and Jason," she said. "My younger son knew I was sick, but didn't know the depth. My oldest was more aware, but didn't understand why I had tubes in my chest. Jason had to work full time to support us, take care of me and be a father."

By March 8, she was on a waiting list to receive a kidney and pancreas. From that day until April 15, a bag was packed for the Tetzlaffs to make the hour and a half drive from Waukesha to Madison at a moment's notice.

"It's hard to wish for the phone to ring," Brenda Tetzlaff said. "Someone's demise meant you're going on."

At 10:45 p.m. April 15, Madison called her - about seven hours after Luis Noriega died. Dr. Jon Odorico, who performed the surgery, warned Brenda she might need one or two dialysis sessions after the surgery. But Luis' kidney and pancreas started working the moment her blood came to the organs, he said.

She spent the next five weeks, while still not being able to move much or eat solid foods, adapting to anti-rejection medication she will take the rest of her life. Some nights during that time, she said, she wasn't sure if she would ever open her eyes again.

"Almost overnight, after those first five weeks, I suddenly felt better," Brenda said. "I could walk to the mailbox and eat real foods. At night after the boys are put to bed, I sit on the couch and can't believe I'm here."

Connected

The Noriegas wanted to know immediately who received Luis' organs. Of all the recipients the Noriegas had gotten letters from, Brenda Tetzlaff was the only one who not only kept in touch, but tried as doggedly to meet them as they did her.

Four months after Brenda first received a letter from Sandy, she spoke with Gilberto Sr. on the phone. He told her the details of Luis' death.

"I cried and cried, but from one amazing phone call, I feel like they are a part of my family and I never had met them," Brenda said. "The first thing I said was I'm giving you all big hugs, and he said he hoped we would, because he hugs, too."

When they finally met, the Tetzlaffs spoke about their sons growing up in Waukesha with enough open space to run around and the Noriegas shared stories about Luis' warmth and humor. They ate Luis' favorite Mexican foods - enchiladas, taquitos and spicy guacamole with chips.

Throughout the day, they played with the Noriegas' two small dogs, Winston and Buddy. During lunch, the two families were politely passing drinks, napkins and plates to each other while swapping stories about housing prices, school systems and their kids getting into trouble.

Sears showed up about an hour after the Tetzlaffs arrived. She and Brenda embraced tightly as the two cried.

"It's so nice to finally meet you," Sears said, barely audible through tears. "It's really nice to meet you, too," Brenda said, choking up. "I'm so sorry. So sorry he died."

Gilberto Sr. approached Brenda after she and Sears let go of each other. "It's OK," he said. "You're at home here."

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