Through My Brotherâ€™s Eyes

Contributed by John Browning
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In the time it takes you to read this column, 18 of the over 100,000 individuals nationwide awaiting organ transplants will die. I know, because my brother Walter was one of them. As deep a loss as this was for me and my family, we all take comfort in the fact that even though time ran out for Walter, the organ and tissue donations made after his death would go on to make a difference in other lives.

Walter was what you might call the black sheep of our family. Once a promising student, he had dropped out of college and drifted through a succession of jobs before settling into construction work. Walter eventually rose to a position as foreman. Unfortunately, along the way, he also had a few brushes with the law and fought a drinking problem. Walter liked to drink, and he liked to ride his motorcycle. Any doubts that combining the two could be disastrous were dispelled one day in 1982, when he nearly died in an accident. For the doctors, repairing Walter’s shattered bones was easy compared to mending the damage to his heart. They performed open heart surgery and put in two pig valves with a limited shelf life; at some point, he would need a heart transplant. With some serious lifestyle changes, Walter would have a shot at holding out until the cardiac cavalry could arrive.

But, my brother was a stubborn person for whom lifestyle changes did not come easily. Directed to find a less physically demanding occupation, Walter refused to give up doing construction. And giving up the bottle wasn’t any easier, even after the wake-up call of losing his driver’s license; Walter continued to battle his demons until he finally found Alcoholics Anonymous several years later. AA saved my brother’s life, or at least helped postpone the imminent demise on which he seemed hellbent. Walter was a changed person, attending (and eventually leading) regular AA meetings and participating in Catholic men’s spiritual retreats for recovering alcoholics. He settled into a serious relationship, living with a young woman who was also in recovery, and work was steady—though physically taxing for a cardiac patient.

And then came April 3, 1991. Walter went from a doctor’s appointment (with its usual depressing news about how others on the transplant list were higher in priority for a variety of reasons) to lunch with his girlfriend, when his heart gave out right there in the restaurant. Later, at the hospital where they viewed the body of their 34 year-old son, my parents made an important decision. Walter had often talked about not wanting to be buried; the ground, he said, was for growing things and building things—not for death. He also wanted his life to make a difference. So, my parents agreed to allow whatever organ and tissue harvesting could be done. Walter’s battered body couldn’t yield as much as they hoped—years of alcohol abuse and medications had taken their toll on his liver and kidneys. But his corneas were taken, as was the bone marrow from the longer bones in his arms and legs; the corneas would provide vision for the blind, while the bone marrow would yield an even greater gift—the gift of life—for cancer patients in need of bone marrow transplants.

Shortly after Walter’s death, several family members and I attended a meeting of his regular AA group. As person after person spoke about the difference Walter had made in his or her life, I marveled at the turnaround his own life had taken. Years later, as I watched helplessly while my brother Michael fought a battle with cancer—a battle that he lost at the tender age of 33—I took some comfort in the fact that out there somewhere with families of their own, were former cancer patients who had won their struggle thanks to the marrow from Walter’s bones. John Gunther wrote “Death be not proud,” and John Dunne famously observed that because “no man is an island,” anyone’s death diminishes us. Yet, I take some pride in the fact that Walter’s death did anything but diminish a select group of people—the people for whom his corneas meant sight and for whom his bone marrow meant life. I still look at cherished old photos of my brother, at his smiling face and his eyes full of life, and I wonder if I’ll ever see those eyes looking back at me again, this time from a stranger.

April is National Donate Life Month. Thanks to the organs harvested from deceased donors like my brother and the roughly 6,000 living donors annually, over 25,000 transplant operations are performed each year in the U.S. Making a difference in the life of another is quick and easy; just sign up the next time you renew your driver’s license, or go to www.donatelifetexas.org. One life may end, but others don’t have to.