

Wow"! How these last years have flown by! It does not seem possible that I have been able to enjoy a normal healthy life again after being ill for so long. Since our family company, Augusta Aviation, Inc. is a [Workplace Partner for Life](#), we believe in promoting organ and tissue donation awareness. My family traveled my personal transplant journey with me and now through this story we would like to share part of it with you in hope that it will help you make a positive decision concerning organ, tissue, and eye donation.



**From the Beginning...**“Oh my goodness, I do look sick!” That is the realization that hit me as I looked in the mirror the morning of August 2, 2002. My will was ready and letters written to family members, but I wasn't ready to die. I had been comforted by the fact that I didn't have that pale look of a sick person. But now....”God please answer my prayer for a miracle”.... The virus that attacked my heart for 7 ½ years was quickly stealing my life away. I only had one hope... a miracle...the gift of life...a heart transplant.

My life had been like a fairy tale. I grew up in Waynesboro, a small rural town in Georgia. I had loving Christian parents, 2 siblings, graduated from nursing school, married my high-school sweetheart, retired from work to become a full-time mom to Michelle, Jeremy, and Tracy, moved into our dream home in the country and settled down to become "a super woman and mother." Involved in volunteer work in the community and at church, chauffeuring my kids around, and substitute teaching at school, a lot of time I "met myself coming and going." I seemed to have an endless supply of energy. Both of our families lived nearby and no one in either family had ever had a serious illness. We were blessed.

My life changed forever in late October 1994. On the way to take my children to school, I began having chest pains. I went shopping with my best friend as planned because nothing stops ladies from shopping the sales, but the pain worsened. We decided I needed to be seen by my doctor. After examining me, the doctor told me my EKG wasn't normal but he didn't think it was life threatening; that I probably had some inflammation and it wasn't anything to worry about. Two days later, on my 38th birthday, I was admitted to the hospital in severe congestive heart failure. It still didn't sink in how sick I was; I joked with the nurses that it was my birthday and no one was showing me enough attention, so I decided to come to the hospital. After much testing, the cardiologist told us that probably an unknown virus had attacked my heart muscle, causing a medical condition called cardiomyopathy. My heart was enlarged and could not pump well.

Nine days later, I went home on lots of medication with instructions to stay in bed and rest for the better part of the next year. We thought it could not get much worse but were we wrong! One month later, I experienced a sudden cardiac death episode. Only my children were home with me. They called 911 and the EMA arrived and quickly started CPR. Using their defibrillator, they restarted my heart. I spent the next two weeks in the ICU during which the doctors implanted an automatic defibrillator.

I came home December 23, just in time for Christmas, my favorite holiday. My daytime "baby-sitters," my mother and mother-in-law, took over the house. My children and my husband adjusted their schedules so I would never be alone. About one year later, I was finally able to stay by myself. I moved slowly and learned to take one day at a time. I picked and chose activities that were the most important to me and saved my energy for those. We coped with this life-style change by God's grace and our faith in Him and with the wonderful support of our families and friends. I had my "pity parties" and then celebrated my blessings. My goal became enjoy life each day. I believed God gave me a second chance at life and I needed to take advantage of that! My motto was "Don't ask God to move the mountain. Instead ask God for the faith to climb the mountain!" Life was bearable.

My condition stabilized for a while even though I did have to have 3 more surgeries related to the defibrillator. In 2001, my stamina was less and my heart function began to decrease. After several hospitalizations, my doctors told me it was time to consider a heart transplant. So off to Emory University we go for regime of tests. The tests revealed I did need a transplant if I wanted to live. What a decision we had to make...to know that someone would die so that I could live... I had to make the hardest decision of my life. As a strong Christian, I asked our Lord to give me a sign so I would know the path He had chosen for my life.

What happened next was my sign: The following day I was watching soap operas. On the Guiding Light, Dr. Rick was sick. His doctor came in and told him he had cardiomyopathy...wait a minute...that's my illness. So my ears perked up. Then the doctor said that he would need to rest and take lots of heart medications.... (Been there done that I thought).... and the doctor stated, "Rick you need a heart transplant if you wish to live". I called my preacher and asked if God talked through soap operas. His reply to me was "God can talk anyway he wishes". Immediately I knew without a doubt that the transplant was God's will for me. On June 13, 2002 I officially was placed on the transplant list.

On July 19 during a check-up, the doctors determined I needed to be admitted to the hospital for a "tune-up. I was

getting weaker each day...my heart just couldn't do its job... After a few days I didn't improve and the doctors realized that I would be staying in the hospital until I received my new heart-probably a time frame of two months to a year. I was still struggling with the fact that soon I would have someone else's heart beating in my body and then I was told I would have to live in the hospital while I waited. It was very discouraging.

One night as I was reading my Bible, a verse in Ezekiel popped out at me "And God said, I will give you a new heart and a new spirit". I knew then without a shadow of a doubt my prayer for healing was to be answered and this was God's plan for my life. I would get my new heart soon.

Five nights later after my family had left for the hotel, my nurse walked into the room with a big smile on her face and said, "Sherrell your heart is on the way". My reaction was "You've got to be kidding." After a moment of realization, I started making the calls to the family. I was never nervous or scared. I knew I was in a win-win situation. —I would wake up with a new healthy heart or I would be in Jesus' arms. As soon as my family arrived, we read favorite scriptures from the Bible and had prayer for my donor and his family. At a time of grief and sadness, they unselfishly with love gave life to a total stranger. I will be forever grateful to them.



After only a week in the hospital, I was discharged to begin my new life. What a difference I felt! No longer was I struggling to breathe... I could climb stairs with ease...I could walk around the whole Mall shopping center (my kids even told me to slow down so they could catch up)...I had my life back. Life was fun again. I can actually make positive plans for the future. I can spend time with family and friends doing all the things I enjoy.... because of my miracle of receiving a new heart. My life is great! I am an active member of the Transplant Awareness Group with LifeLink speaking at churches, schools, health fairs, and civic clubs sharing my story and promoting organ donation awareness, I serve as the Georgia Transplant Foundation Emory heart mentor project coordinator working with candidates and recipients to answer questions, offer hope, comfort, and encouragement during their stressful life changing entrance into the world of transplantation. I am a director with the Boshears Memorial Skyfest Airshow. I participate as a member of Team Georgia in the National Transplant Games. These games are held every 2 years and transplant recipients from all across the country participate in Olympic style games to show the world we can lead normal lives.

Our family businesses, Augusta Aviation, Straight A Express, and Battery Clinic are all Workplace Partners for life promoting organ and tissue donation and I serve as our spokesperson. My family enjoys spending time together camping, water skiing, snow skiing, and other activities. I play the organ at my church and serve as assistant Sunday School director, future planning team and on the church council. I heard from my donor's family and now know that my donor was a 28-year-old young man who was very loved by his family...so much that they were able to make the decision to give life to a stranger in their time of despair and grief. I must keep my gift going. My donor's family gave me my life back. I know I must share with others what this has meant to my family and me.

**Life goes on...** I can't even begin to list all the first time events I have been able to enjoy these last years...from riding in a helicopter, to climbing a mountain, to riding my bicycle over 30 miles at one stretch, and even the simple thing of enjoying a sunset with my husband. I participated in the 2006 US Transplant Games in Louisville Kentucky came in 6th in the 100-meter the 5k-bike race. But the race. A thunderstorm delayed hot and humid. I was the only one on a mountain bike wasn't a bike racer but I was my face. The gun started the On the last lap still smiling, I tired and glad the race was friends we had made waiting to heard my name called. I didn't have a clue what was going on. As it turned out, I had actually won the bronze medal! I was trembling and crying. Tony was allowed to place the medal around my neck. How honored and humbled I was to receive a medal at these games. Also Tracy recognizing how important my mentoring other heart candidates and recipients and my passion for promoting organ donation awareness is to me sent in a nomination letter, which allowed me to be recognized as a Giving Your Best CSRA Jefferson Award Nominee.



**Life just gets better...** Our last child, Tracy graduated from the college and landed "the job of her dreams with LifeLink of Georgia, the organ procurement organization. One of her responsibilities



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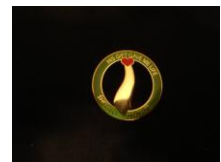
is to facilitate the Transplant Advocacy Group (TAG) for which I am a volunteer...so technically she is my boss. I became the director of the Georgia Transplant Foundation Mentor Project. As mentors we offer hope and encouragement in what can be an anxious time to transplant candidates/recipients/living donors and caregivers. I was honored to be included on Emory's Transplant Center's Wall of Fame.

In May 2007 I received the most wonderful phone call from the LifeLink office – someone had called to check on me. It was my donor's mother and she was, yet nervous too! What could I girl? Tony, Tracy and I went to the waiting for their arrival, I could not outside the door. The tears started it. When Jean walked in and saw said, "Sherrell don't cry...it's okay". friends for a long time. She his little girl Sheila who was then 7 Jean had grown up in soon realized they went to high with my uncle. She told me all about my donor – Ty Harrison Bray. She gave me Christmas cards which were designed using Ty's drawings (he was a gifted artist) and Sheila had drawn me a heart picture. She also had brought me a rose bush for my garden. I took her a double stemmed Gerber daisy symbolic of our two hearts together. Even then we were thinking about "living". It was an amazing day! Now we could contact each other and visit whenever we wanted. Shortly after our visit, Jean designed a quilt square for LifeLink's Donor Remembrance Quilt. It was done with flowers and crossword squares border. The words at the top were Ty Harrison Bray along with the date of his death- August 2, 2002. On the left side it read A Giving Heart and on the Right – Still Beats On. Across the bottom were my name Sherrell Gay and the date I got his heart – August 3, 2002. The quilt travels with LifeLink to events across the state. It is a way to honor the memory of all the donors by their families. She also made me a small quilt using same flowers and colors. The following February I met 3 of Ty's sisters and one of his brothers. Again it was very emotional but healing at the same time. I am blessed to have been accepted by this loving family.



was ready to meet me. How excited I say to my donor's parents and his little LifeLink office in Atlanta. Sitting there be still. Then I heard their footsteps coming down my cheeks...I couldn't help my tears, in a quiet motherly voice she We hugged and I felt like we had been introduced me to Larry, Ty's father and years old. We talked and learned that Wadley...where my Daddy grew up. We school together and she had graduated

The 2008 Transplant Games were held in Pittsburgh. I was recovering from surgery (unrelated to my transplant) so I was not able to participate in my usual events, although I did try my hand at table tennis. This allowed me more time to meet donor families and other recipients. I designed a special pin (I call it my "TY pin") in memory of my donor. It is a neck tie with the knot of the tie shaped like a heart. Along the edge it reads "His Gift Gave Me Life" with my name and transplant date. I wear my pin everyday and was able to give out over 500 at the games.



In September 2008, I enjoyed the wedding of our son, Jeremy to April and then in October the wedding of our daughter Tracy to Shane. Without my gift of life, I wouldn't have been here for those precious events. \



In 2010 we enjoyed the US Transplant Games in Wisconsin and then went for my annual check-up. We learned I had a blockage in the lower part of my heart. Three months later, we were told I was in the beginning stages of chronic rejection. We tried medication changes without much success. In early 2011, the team told me my heart was a lot

worse and my only hope in living was to consider listed for a second transplant. That was a very hard decision for me since as a mentor I knew almost everyone waiting for transplant at Emory. I had experienced one gift of live ...how could I try for a second? Tony reminded me that our faith in God got us through the sick years and the first transplant. How could I not continue to trust God's plan for my life? That thought made me realized I couldn't say no. I had to say yes. I officially was added to the official transplant list on July 27, 2011. I thought I would get this heart quickly like the first time. But that wasn't the plan. The holidays came and went. Our oldest daughter Michelle became engaged. We started planning the wedding. Finally I was too sick to wait at home and entered the hospital in May 2012. We continued with the wedding plans having the cake tasting, addressed the invitations and more in my hospital room. We also found out Tracy was pregnant with our first grandchild. I was discharged for three weeks to be able to attend Michelle and Chris's wedding. I was back in the hospital 2 days after the wedding. I began to worsen more quickly - having 2 heart attacks, coding during a heart block attack, founding out I would need a kidney transplant also, starting dialysis. Finally 17 months after listing, on December 9, 2012 we were told my perfect matched organs had been found. After 16 hours in surgery, I had a second donor heart and a donor kidney. We were told the donor was a 16 year old young man. Augusta





Aviation, Inc. had a part in this journey...they were called and approved to transplant my organs. How amazing is that! All went well and 2 months after transplant we were home. Now almost 2 years post the two organ transplant, I am doing well. I became a "Suga" to Roy Anthony Douglas Ide...a royal fellow who keeps me on my toes. Tony and I celebrated our 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. We have enjoyed trips to festivals, transplant related events and spending time with our family. I was able to participate in the 2014 Transplant Games of America. It is always amazing to see so many miracles in one place. It is hard to remember that our heart disease journey began 20 years ago. I'm privileged to share my story and to hopefully influence those that read it to seriously consider becoming an organ tissue, and eye donor. Georgia is now a first person consent state so to have your wishes concerning organ and tissue donation documented please go to [www.donatelifegeorgia.org](http://www.donatelifegeorgia.org). And tell you family too! I'd love to hear from you if you have comments or questions about my story or organ donation- just send a note to [sherrellgay@att.net](mailto:sherrellgay@att.net).



**Donation Facts:**

- Approximately 123,149 Americans are currently on the transplant waiting list.
- On average, 18 people die daily while waiting for an organ transplant.
- Every 11 minutes, another name is added to the waiting list.
- One organ and tissue donor can save 8 people's lives and help 50 others.
- All major world religions support organ donation and view it as the greatest act of charity.
- Emergency medical personnel will do everything to save your life if you are in an accident, even if you have chosen to be an organ donor.
- It is possible to have an open casket funeral if you are an organ and tissue donor; donation does not mutilate the body.
- There is no cost to the donor family if a loved one becomes an organ donor.



**MYTH:** If you're rich and/or famous you'll get a transplant quicker.  
**FACT:** Organs are allocated based on blood type, body size, severity of illness, length of time on the waiting list and proximity to transplant center. A national organization (UNOS) ensures federal, regional and local laws and protocols

regarding allocation are followed.

**MYTH:** There is a large black market for organs in the U.S.

**FACT:** It is illegal to buy or sell body parts in the United States. Several urban legends – such as someone waking in a tub of ice minus a kidney – have circulated in the media for years. These ideas make for interesting movies, but there hasn't been a single documented case.

**MYTH:** People have been known to "wake up" from brain death.

**FACT:** Brain death is not a coma, nor is it the same as a persistent vegetative state. It is a clinical and legal determination of death which occurs when someone experiences a major and irreversible trauma to the brain and brain stem. Brain death occurs when the brain swells to the point where it can receive no oxygen or blood. The entire brain then dies. It is possible for certain bodily functions such as heartbeat and breathing to continue for a few hours or days, but only when these patients are on mechanical devices within the hospital. The machines cannot work permanently. A number of neurological tests must be performed in order to confirm brain death.

**MYTH:** Doctors don't try to save organ donors who are in life-threatening accidents.

**FACT:** Emergency medical staff has nothing to do with organ and tissue recovery. They do not work for transplant centers and have one goal: to save the lives of the patients in their emergency rooms. Organ transplant specialists are only contacted after all efforts to save a patient have been exhausted and the patient has died.



Register to be an organ, tissue and/or eye donor.....

[www.donatelifegeorgia.org](http://www.donatelifegeorgia.org) (the organ donor official registry)

At your state Division of Drivers Services (DDS) when you apply for your drivers' license or renew your license

Please be sure to tell your family your wishes!