

The Gift That Gave Us One More Thanksgiving

By: Kirah Z. Young

My birthday will never be the same.

On October 31, 2022, the phone rang. I had just turned 15, but that call gave my family something far greater than a celebration. After months of waiting and watching my grandfather's heart slowly fail, we got news we never expected to hear: a donor heart had been found.

My grandfather—Popi, as we called him—was 68 and had been battling congestive heart failure for years. It was hereditary. My great grandfather died from the same condition. By the time he got his LVAD, a mechanical pump to keep his blood moving, his heart was only operating at 3%. He was tired all the time. Simple tasks became exhausting. Walking across a room could leave him breathless. But he kept fighting. The LVAD bought him time, but it wasn't a cure. What he needed was a new heart. And the odds weren't in his favor.

Still, he waited—and we waited with him. We knew the transplant surgery would be risky. He knew it too. But when the call came, he didn't hesitate. "Let's go," he said, calm and steady. He chose hope.

On November 1, 2022—the day after my birthday—he received a heart transplant. The donor, a stranger we'll never know, gave our family something precious: time. That heart gave us one more Thanksgiving.

It wasn't a Thanksgiving you'd see in a commercial. It was held in a hospital room. The meal was simple, low sodium for Popi's new heart. Some family members couldn't join in person because of COVID protocols, so we pulled them in through Zoom. The food was plain, the setting sterile, but the room was full of love. More love than I can describe.

For the first time in a long time, we laughed without fear. We shared memories. We made new ones. We talked about the future; something we hadn't allowed ourselves to do for months. There was talk of Christmas, vacations, a trip he wanted to take when he got stronger. For that one moment, we weren't living in crisis. The gift of that donor heart let us dream again.

That Thanksgiving will live in my heart forever. It wasn't about the food or the decorations—it was about gratitude. Not the kind you write on a greeting card, but the kind that fills your chest until it hurts. We were grateful for another day. Another breath. Another chance to tell Popi how much we loved him.

He passed away a few weeks later, in December, from a heart attack. His body had been through so much, and in the end, it was just too much to bear. But those final weeks were a gift. We got to say goodbye with presence and peace. Not everyone gets that.

And that's why I'm writing this.

Because right now, over 100,000 people in the United States are waiting for a life-saving transplant. Every 8 minutes, someone new is added to that list. And every day, 17 people die waiting for an organ that never comes (Health Resources & Services Administration, 2023).

We can change that.

By registering as an organ, eye, and tissue donor, you could save up to eight lives and help more than 75 others. Just one person—one yes—can give another family the hope we were given.

I know organ donation can be uncomfortable to think about. Some people worry they're too old, or not healthy enough. Others wonder what their faith says about it. But most people can donate, even if they've had health issues. And nearly every major religion supports organ donation as a final act of compassion and love (Mayo Clinic, 2024).

Maybe you've thought about signing up. Maybe you haven't. Either way, I hope my family's story helps you see the difference a single decision can make.

I will never know the name of the person who gave Popi his heart. I can't thank them. But I can live in a way that honors their gift—and I can ask you to consider making the same choice.

That donor gave us a last Thanksgiving. A chance to look forward instead of bracing for goodbye. A chance to celebrate. To gather. To love.

Please, say yes.

Register to be an organ, eye, and tissue donor. Give another family one more memory. One more day. One more reason to hope.

It takes less than a minute. Just go to RegisterMe.org. It's easy. It's free. And it could change everything for someone else.

Popi's new heart only beat for a short while. But in those weeks, we got the gift of goodbye. The gift of joy. The gift of dreaming out loud again.

And it all started with a stranger's yes.