

In the Fall of 2018, my grandfather, whom we lovingly call Pop, was diagnosed with Stage 4 kidney disease. He was placed on the transplant list and told, on average, he could be waiting upwards of 5 years for a donation. We didn't know if he had that long. My family rallied around him, seeking a living donor from every resource we knew. Posts were made on social media, calls were made to friends and family near and far and lots of prayers were sent up to keep him healthy enough to eventually receive a donation. My mom traveled to Boston to spend 2 days getting poked and prodded in hopes that she could donate one of her healthy kidneys, only to be told in the 11<sup>th</sup> hour that she wasn't a perfect match.

But this is not a story of sadness. Or failure. This is a story of resilience and hope. Of perseverance and a whole lot of luck. Because on November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2022, my Pop got the call.

Let me take a step back. Growing up, I watched my mom donate blood on a regular basis. She would come home from a blood drive with a colorful wrap around her arm and a couple of fun snacks to share with me. She'd have a bold sticker on with sayings like "What's your superpower?" or "Today, I saved 3 lives!" I once asked her why she donates blood all the time and she said "well if I ever need blood donated to me, I will know I've done my part in contributing to the blood bank". When my brother turned 16, he started going with her and they would donate together. The thought still scared me a little but I realized it could be a neat way to bond with my mom and also give back to the community. I knew that once I was old enough, I would try and donate myself. Ironically as I type this, my first donation was today at school! I don't really feel any different (well, except a bit light-headed) but my mom keeps telling me that I'm a hero, that I've potentially saved 3 lives by my donation. Is it really that easy?

When I first got my learner's permit, I checked the box that authorized my organ donation, should I be in a life-ending accident. I didn't really think much of it. I won't need my organs, or

my eyes, or any other part of my body, when I die. Kind of a morbid thought but a necessary one. So sure, I'll be an organ donor. I remember my friends and I talking about it like it was no big deal, though a few friends said "no way, I want to be buried with all my parts!" I hadn't really thought much about that until I learned about my Pop's situation.

When news about Pop was announced, none of us really knew how to respond. We were worried, scared, apprehensive and full of questions. Without any real thought or hesitation, my mom immediately said "well, I'll give you one of my kidneys, Dad!" Could it really be that easy? Mom told me about the questionnaire she had to fill out and the tests she had to do here in Virginia before being elevated to a true potential donor status. When that happened, she flew up to Boston for two days to go through more rigorous testing, involving more blood work, MRI scans and consultations with surgeons and psychiatrists. Everything looked great until she had to take the long glucose test, at which time they determined she was in the pre-diabetic category and because of the family history, she wouldn't be allowed to donate. But like I said, this is a story of perseverance.

Did you know that there are over 400,000 living organ transplant recipients alive today? And the US has performed over 1 million transplants to date? After more than 4 years on peritoneal dialysis, Pop got the call we were all waiting for...there was a viable kidney waiting for him in Boston! We all held our breath as he was rolled into surgery and 4 hours later emerged with a new organ. What an amazing gift! My Pop, at 79 years of age, is one of the oldest donor kidney recipients ever at Mass General Hospital. I just talked to him on Christmas day and he is doing amazing. He can't wait to get back to work (yes, at 79, he still works!) He loves being outside and will continue to be a softball official as soon as he's given the green light. Disney World is his absolute favorite place in the world and he plans to visit once again this fall. And although he

wasn't able to travel to Virginia for my brother's graduation two years ago in the midst of dialysis and Covid, he will hopefully be here to watch me walk across the stage when I receive my diploma in June.

So why should you check the box? Do you really think you can take your body to the grave with you? Do you really want to? Organ donation is considered by many religious leaders to be one of the most charitable acts a person can do. It won't cost your family anything if your organs are recovered and donated. Listen to this: one person's organ donation can save up to 8 lives. While checking the box on your license might be the first step to becoming a donor, many people can donate their organs while they're still alive. We don't know the full story behind my Pop's donor, but we will forever be grateful for the gift of life he gave our Pop. He is here on this earth today thanks to one person who selflessly checked the box. Don't hesitate, be someone's hero and save a life (or 8!)

### **Sources**

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