

## Surviving & Thriving...Thanks to Organ Donors

Prick, prick, prick. The mere thought of needles made my skin crawl. "It's just a 'poke'. Don't cry, hold it in, deep breaths, and close your eyes." These words echoed in my mind every time I approached the infusion center, where nurses accessed my portacath, drew blood, and administered the chemotherapy.

After a diagnosis of Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia (ALL), 3 years of chemotherapy infusions, spinal taps, 2 bone marrow transplants, 3 portacath surgeries and many stays at Children's National Medical Center in Washington DC, my family was asked to participate in one of the Leukemia and Lymphomas Society's (LLS) biggest fundraisers. I am proud to say that I was the LLS "Girl of the Year" and helped not only achieve but beat the goal of raising over \$1 million for much needed blood cancer research – much of which was conducted on graciously donated tissue and organs. Kids before me had paved the way for the lifesaving chemotherapy that ultimately kept me alive. It was my way to give back at that time. Since then, I have signed up to become an organ/eye/tissue donor to continue giving back to the medical research community. They are striving hard to find cures for cancers and other devastating conditions so that people can heal and families can become one again. According to the medical article published in the Cell and Tissue Banking journal, "There is no substitute for human tissue when studying the human body. Through donation, scientists are able to advance our understanding of disease and the development of new treatments. Research breakthroughs in Alzheimer's disease, cancer, heart disease, diabetes, Parkinson's disease, and more have been made possible because individuals chose to donate.<sup>i</sup>"

Spending so much time on the oncology floor, I observed the nurses, medical students, interns, and doctors during hospital rotations. I learned how scientists' research, using donated tissue and organs, fuels the development of new drugs, leading to clinical studies. I even participated in one such study, helping to refine protocols for cancer treatment. The researchers and individuals who played a vital role in saving my life continue to inspire me. Like them, I want to be an integral part of that world, through research where donated organs and tissues play a critical and integral part. The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine states, "Body donation also plays a critical role in helping medical and health-related science students master their comprehension of the complex anatomy of the human body. Medical students and other healthcare professionals use human bodies to learn and perfect the skills that will one day benefit the health of society<sup>ii</sup>."

One registered donor can save and improve the lives of numerous people through organ and tissue donation. Your decision to become a donor can be the answer someone desperately needs. It is simple to register as a donor by visiting your state's donor registry website. Find it easily through Donate Life America: <https://donatelife.net/> and it only takes a few minutes to register. Talk to your family and friends and encourage them to register too. Your legacy can be one of immense generosity and compassion. Become a donor today. Be the light of hope someone desperately needs. Together, we can save lives, just as others have helped save mine. Will you join the movement?

I wear my portacath scar boldly as a symbol of victory, a constant reminder of what I have faced. Conquering childhood cancer has shaped me and led to the realization that without registered organ, eye, and tissue donors, I would not be here today, nor would many many others. The generosity of organ/tissue donors has given me a second chance at life where I am confident I will continue to make a positive impact and not only survive, but thrive.

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<sup>i</sup> Baldasare, D. (2010). Linking organ donors and the medical/scientific research community: a US perspective. *Cell and Tissue Banking*, 12(1), 33–35. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10561-010-9216-2>

<sup>ii</sup> Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine. (n.d.). Donate your body to science. <https://www.pcrm.org/ethical-science/animal-testing-and-alternatives/donate-your-body-to-science>