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FOLLOWING THE TRAGIC DEATH OF THEIR SON, ONE FAMILY GAVE THE GIFT OF LIFE THROUGH ORGAN DONATION.

# Remembering Walter

Bob Smietana

**W**alter Tessmer of Biwabik, Minnesota, used to carry a piece of paper in one of his high-school notebooks entitled “Rules of the world.” Rule number one: life is not fair.

Walter knew a lot of how unfair life could be. He was born three months early, and weighed just over a pound at birth. Being born premature left Walter with a series of health problems including a cleft lip and palate and a lifelong case of serious asthma. During the first seventeen years of his life, Walter had more than eighteen surgeries.

The last was in August 2000, just after Walter returned from CHIC2K, the Covenant Church’s youth conference. The surgery was nothing major. Walter had problems with his jaw. Doctors were planning to attach a headpiece that would realign it.

“It wasn’t supposed to be anything difficult,” says Cheryl Tessmer, Walter’s mom. “But he had a hard time coming out of the anesthesia. It was supposed to be an in [in the morning] and out in the afternoon thing, and we ended up being there three days.”

For a time, it looked like Walter would not make it. When he recovered

Walter told his mom about a near-death experience he had. “I saw this bright light and a man,” Walter said. “The man told me, ‘It’s not time yet.’ ”

Two months later, it was time.

On Friday, October 15, Cheryl got the call that all parents fear. Walter had been helping a teacher do some yard work after school and had an asthma attack. In most cases, Walter’s inhaler would have helped him during the attack. This time it didn’t. Walter stopped breathing and went into cardiac arrest. He was taken to the hospital in Virginia, Minnesota, where Cheryl worked. From there he was taken to St. Mary’s Medical Center in Duluth.

“My mother and I had gone to the [Twin] Cities for a shopping trip,” says Cheryl. “We got the call and went right to Duluth.”

By the time Walter got to St. Mary’s, he was in a coma. Tests on Friday showed that he had very little brain activity. Tests on Saturday showed no brain activity.

Cheryl and her family talked together about the possibility of donating Walter’s organs. They agreed to talk the next morning with representatives from LifeSource, the organization that coordinates organ donation in Minnesota and

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the Dakotas.

While the family waited, Walter's room was crowded with visitors. They had come to see Walter, hoping that he was going to be all right. Kids from Walter's school came along with some of the school counselors. Jeff Jones, pastor of Biwabik Covenant Church came to visit, along with the youth group. The youth group gathered around Walter's bed and sang some of his favorite camp songs.

We knew that Walter was going to go," says Cheryl, "and the kids all had a chance to say goodbye to him. The family was there and we sat with him. He was never alone."

When LifeSource team arrived, the family all gathered in a conference room, along with Jeff Jones. The family decided to donate Walter's heart, liver, and kidneys. After the meeting, the Life-

Source team began searching for matches.

"Then they told us it was time," says Cheryl, with her voice cracking. "We all said our goodbyes. He was seventeen-years old, and after all that he went through, I didn't expect that it would end like this."

Just before Walter's funeral, the family received a letter from LifeSource about the transplant.

"We would also like to extend our gratitude to you for thinking of others by giving the Gift of Life to those whom you have never met," the letter read. "Walter was able to help four people through organ donation. These recipients and their families will never forget the unselfish gifts you have given. While we realize nothing we say will take away the pain you are feeling, it is our hope

that the following information may bring you some comfort."

In the letter, the family learned that Walter's heart went to a twenty-one-year-old woman, who would have died without a transplant. His kidneys went to a fifty-six-year-old woman and a sixty-year-old woman. His liver went to a thirty-seven-year-old youth pastor who loved basketball, something that comforted Walter's family.

"Walter played basketball when he was younger and wanted to play in high school," Cheryl says. "But he had trouble with his knees, and with asthma and the running, he just couldn't keep up with the other kids. So he managed the basketball team for one year—he went

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*Bob Smetana is associate editor of The Covenant Companion.*

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to all the games and kept statistics. All the guys on the team adored him.”

Most of the basketball team came to Walter’s funeral. The players who had been seniors the season before were Walter’s pallbearers. One of them told Jones, “Walter was my role model. He put up with so much and still kept going.”

For the funeral, a local photographer provided pictures of Walter in the jacket he received for being the basketball team manager. Walter’s physical difficulties often meant that he struggled with self-esteem. Being the manager was something he was very proud of. “It gave him so much value,” Jones says, “because the team needed him.”

Walter used to tell his mother that he had few friends and wondered if anyone at school really cared about him. But Walter made a greater impact than

he ever knew. Over 400 people came to his funeral. So many wanted to come to the funeral that it was held at St. John’s Catholic Church, the only church in town that could accommodate the crowd.

During the funeral, Jones reminded the congregation of two of the sayings that Walter tried to live his life by. One was that it’s better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all. The other was listed ninth on Walter’s rules of the world—“staying happy involves work.”

“Both of these ideals proved to be daily tasks for him,” Jones told the congregation. “[Walter’s] final parting gift was the giving of his actual heart, and other organs, so that others could receive life.” □

## **ORGAN DONATION STATISTICS**

- ▶ Over 74,000 people in the U.S. are awaiting organ transplants.
- ▶ In 1999, (the last year statistics are available), 21,655 people in the U.S. received donated organs. That same year, 10,576 people donated their organs.
- ▶ April 15-21, 2001 is National Organ and Tissue Donor Awareness Week

### **FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

#### **LifeSource**

2550 University Avenue West  
Suite 315 South  
St. Paul, MN 55114  
[www.life-source.org](http://www.life-source.org)

#### **Coalition on Donation**

1100 Boulders Parkway, Suite 700  
Richmond, VA 23225-8770  
[coalition@unos.org](mailto:coalition@unos.org)  
[www.shareyourlife.org](http://www.shareyourlife.org)

#### **National Foundation for Transplants** *(assists families who cannot afford transplant)*

102 Brookfield, Suite 200  
Memphis, Tennessee 38119  
[nftpr@aol.com](mailto:nftpr@aol.com)  
[www.transplants.org](http://www.transplants.org)

## **Organ Donation FAQ:**

### **How are organs distributed to patients waiting for organ transplants?**

Every person waiting for an organ transplant is registered with UNOS, the United Network for Organ Sharing. UNOS manages the computerized network to match organ donors with waiting recipients.

Each area of the U.S. has a non-profit, federally designated, organ procurement organization. When a family gives permission for organ donation, the local donation organization inputs medical information about the organ donor into a database and prints a computerized match list of potential recipients. Matching is based upon medical criteria such as blood type, weight, size of the organ, length of time waiting for a transplant, and severity of the illness.

### **What organs are needed for donation?**

The heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, pancreas, and small intestines can all be donated. One organ donor can save the lives of eight people.

### **What are the benefits of organ donation?**

Families who make the decision to donate often find that donation helps them through their grieving process. They receive great personal benefit by being able to have something positive come from the death of a loved one. For recipients, organ transplants offer a second chance at life.

### **How do I become an organ donor?**

Tell your family your wishes. In the event of your death, your next-of-kin’s permission must be obtained. An organ donor card or your driver’s license are only indications of your wishes. Family consent must still be obtained.

### **What can I do if a member of my family becomes a potential organ donor?**

If no one on the medical team suggests organ donation, you, as the next-of-kin, should inform the medical staff of your wishes. Organs will only be removed if there is written permission from the family.

### **What are the criteria for becoming an organ donor?**

Organs can be donated only after a person has been declared brain dead while their vital organs are being maintained on a breathing machine. Age criteria is evaluated on an individual basis.

### **Is there a cost to the donor family?**

No. There is no charge to the donor’s family or to his or her estate for organ donation.

### **How do family members respond when the possibility of organ donation is discussed at the time of a loved one’s death?**

Grief-stricken family members have often said their sorrow has been eased by the knowledge that their personal tragedy gave new life to another person and that it provided some meaning to an otherwise senseless death. Many more families today are raising the issue of organ donation themselves because they are aware of its lifesaving value.

*Source: adapted from [www.life-source.org](http://www.life-source.org)*