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Taking strides toward healing: McHenry transplant recipient bonds with donor family

By CRYSTAL LINDELL - clindell@nwherald.com

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Before Donna Frett's liver started to fail, she was not on the organ donation registry.

"I had the same thoughts that I think everybody does," she said. "You just think that if you're in an accident and they see that you're a donor, that they're just not going to help save you, which is so untrue."

Then, after the McHenry resident was diagnosed with primary biliary cirrhosis, a chronic liver disease that slowly destroys bile ducts to the liver, her perspective changed.

"They said the only cure is a transplant, and I thought, 'I'm not even a donor,'" said Frett, who's been on the registry since.



H. Rick Bamman – hbamman@nwherald.com Donna Frett works out in her McHenry neighborhood. Frett is planning to host a golf outing to raise money for the 2010 U.S. Transplant Games being held in Madison, Wis. Frett received a liver transplant in 2005. (H. Rick Bamman ())

Frett lived with the disease for about 20 years before it got so bad she was told her death was imminent without a transplant.

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Her liver no longer was filtering cholesterol out of her body, and her cholesterol level had reached 1,500, more than seven times the normal level of about 200.

Also, her skin had a vivid, jaundice-induced yellow tint.

Then, on June 8, 2005, she got the liver she needed from Dustin Rozmenoski, a 23-year-old Wisconsin man who died in a motorcycle accident the day before.

"I couldn't help but think somebody had just died," said Frett, now 54. "And that was very, very hard."

She since has had the relatively unusual opportunity to meet Rozmenoski's family, including his mom, Mary Jo.

"It was part of our healing," Rozmenoski said. "It was a way to find something good in our tragedy."

Aside from the organ Frett received, Dustin also donated his heart, pancreas, both kidneys, and his corneas to other recipients.

Rozmenoski said her son had talked with her and her husband, Danny, about his desire to be an organ donor years before the accident, which made the whole process easier.

"It would have been very, very difficult had he not made the decision," she said.

"When I think back to that day, as a mom, I just wanted to leave him alone at that point. I just wanted to wrap him up in a blanket because he had been through so much trauma."

Frett and Rozmenoski, who lives in Black River Falls, Wis., started communicating about three months after Frett received her liver.

The two sent letters back and forth at first anonymously, through an organ procurement organization.

All of them had to be screened because they couldn't exchange personal information until both had signed release forms. After months of communication, the two met Aug. 3, 2007.

"Being able to have a relationship with [the Rozmenoski family] has just been unbelievable," Frett said. "They say that by knowing me, it has helped them heal. [But] it has helped me heal so much."

Rozmenoski said Frett was the only recipient she had met in person, but she does keep in contact with other recipients who are ready for it.

"It's really an individual thing," she said. "There's something called recipient guilt, and one of the recipients is living that big time, questioning why he is living and Dustin is not."

Jill Ellefson, executive director of the University of Wisconsin Organ Procurement Organization, which oversaw Frett's transplant, said it was becoming more common for families to meet.

"Ten years ago there probably weren't as many, but now over time people have gotten more used to the idea," she said. "For families who are ready for it, it does help with the healing, but some families are never going to ready for it."

After Rozmenoski and Frett's initial meeting, the two stayed in touch. Members of both families even attended the 2008 U.S. Transplant Games together.

Now, Frett is planning to compete in the 2010 U.S. Transplant Games, which are slated to be in Madison, Wis. In the games, recipients compete in athletic events, such as cycling, swimming, and track and field.

The two also have spoken together at public events about organ donation.

"If you would accept an organ in order to live, then why wouldn't you donate?" Rozmenoski said.

Although their friendship was brought on by tragedy, it has played a therapeutic role in Rozmenoski's grief process.

"It's very emotional, and even today, there is an energy between us," she said. "It's peaceful, and it's healing."



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