



Kristina Spychalski (from left), John Gill, Dave Villanueva, Suzanne Ruff, Bill Ruff, Janice Gill and JoAnn Villanueva attended the U.S. Transplant Games in Pittsburgh last month. SUPPLIED PHOTO

# MEDAL OR NOT, NOBODY LOSES

U.S. TRANSPLANT GAMES | Gift of life celebrated by Southland athletes

BY STEPHANIE GEHRING  
STAFF WRITER

Ronald Hargarten came home from the U.S. Transplant Games with a bronze medal.

But the medals are not really the point for the 65-year-old Palos Park man.

"I go not to win, but to be a participant and for the experience," he said.

Hargarten competed in bowling and golf at the U.S. Transplant Games in Pittsburgh.

He finished third in the bowling competition.

He was one of 44 Illinois athletes, including a handful from the Southland, who competed last month in the Olympics-style games held every two years for athletes who have received organ transplants.

The event includes not only the athletic competitions but also ceremonies honoring living organ donors and families of deceased organ donors.

Hargarten never has met the family who agreed to donate their loved one's organs, but he said he would like to.

At the very least, he is grateful.

Without the healthy liver he received in 2003, Hargarten, who waited 2½ years for a new liver to replace his diseased one, probably



Ronald Hargarten, of Palos Park, shows off the bronze medal he won at the U.S. Transplant Games. SUPPLIED PHOTO

*It's like one big family. If we could ship it around the world, we wouldn't have wars.*

RONALD HARGARTEN,  
ON THE TRANSPLANT GAMES

More than 99,000 U.S. patients are waiting for an organ transplant, and 18 die each day while waiting, according to information from the National Kidney Foundation, which sponsors the games as a way to raise awareness and celebrate the success of transplants.

"To me, organ donation is the greatest thing around," Hargarten said. "I saw my daughter get married, and I've had three more grandchildren since the transplant."

He says he'll go to the games as long as he can.

"It's like one big family," he said. "If we could ship it around the world, we wouldn't have wars."

Gregory Dudley, 46, of Matteson, received a new kidney from his wife, Delphine Dudley, in 2006. He had gone into total renal failure and was on dialysis for four hours a night, three days a week.

"I was so sick I couldn't get out of the house," he said. "Now I'm almost like a normal person."

He competed in his first games last month and said he found the games therapeutic.

"I got to meet a lot of people who are in the same situation as me," he said. "I thought, 'It's not just me. Somebody else went through this.'"

He said the games motivated him and he hopes to compete in the international games in Australia next year.

Lori Wleklinski has volunteered her time in the past spreading the word about the importance of transplants.

The games draw people back year after year, the Tinley Park woman said.

"There's never any doubt once you've gone," she said. "You're with people like you. You're with people that have experienced the same things you have."

The 49-year-old Tinley Park resident received a kidney in 1987 after almost four years on dialysis.

More donors are needed, she said.

"You could save so many lives," she said. "How could you not?"

"How could you even think otherwise?"

The Gill family knows firsthand about how organ donation can change lives.

Janice Gill, of Orland Park, her sister, JoAnn Villanueva, and their late mother, Joan Gill, all suffered from polycystic kidney disease and received kidney transplants.

Janice Gill, 53, said she was able to compete in the games with her mother in the past and now competes with her sister.

"I like to put the word out that anybody can do it. It's a touching experience to see all these people who have received different kinds of organs and can compete," she said. "We are showing that after we receive an organ that we can still go on with life."

Suzanne Ruff, another sister, gave Villanueva one of her kidneys in 2004.

Villanueva, 54, said the Transplant Games let her show her 55-year-old sister how grateful she is. The words "thank you" just aren't enough.

"She gave me back my life, and the Transplant Games gave me the opportunity to tell Suzanne that my life is going on because of her," she said.

The games also are a ray of hope for her two daughters, who one day might be diagnosed with the genetic disease, Villanueva said.

"The games help me show my daughters that life is scary and we could possibly face another diagnosis, but the Transplant Games show that we will conquer and we will live," she said.

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Delphine Dudley



Gregory Dudley