



Barrington woman using Rose Parade for organ donor awareness

By Burt Constable | Daily Herald Staff

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- ["Thank You," written and performed by Jay Gulotta, and produced by Michael Schulze](#)

That moment on New Year's Day when Anne Gulotta of Barrington will wave to the crowd and vast TV audience from her perch on a colorful float in the joyous Rose Parade was made possible by a crushing and painful sadness.

It must have been impossible to imagine anything positive coming out of that dark day seven years ago when Jay Gulotta, Anne's husband and father of their two teenagers, committed suicide at age 46 by shooting himself in the head.

"When I think about it, which is every day, it seems like yesterday," Anne says, noting she can "still feel the pain of losing him."

In the wake of Jay's death, Anne and their children, Elizabeth and Jay, mustered the strength to forge a positive legacy for the man they loved by donating his organs, something the family had talked about when the kids got their driver's licenses. Jay's heart went to a 55-year-old man. His kidneys were split between a 16-year-old girl and a 42-year-old woman.

When Anne finally met the woman who received Jay's left kidney, she put her hands on the woman's scar and made the connection.

"We've become closer and closer friends," Anne says. Seeing the power of that ultimate gift bringing life to another person "continues to give me the strength and will to promote organ donation," says Anne, who adds that organ donation also changed the perception of Jay's death.

"We remember Jay not as someone who took his own life, but as someone who gave life to others," Anne says.

As one of the "New Life Rises" riders on the 2010 Donate Life Rose Parade Float in Pasadena, Calif., representing Gift of Hope Organ & Tissue Donor Network, Anne will be next to a floragraph portrait of her late husband, made entirely of flowers, seeds and spices. Their children, Elizabeth, 24, and Jay, 23, will be in the grandstand.

"They will be coming to Pasadena with me to celebrate the Rose Bowl event and their father," Anne says.

The family first entered a "Donate Life Float" in the Barrington 4th of July parade four years ago, and were encouraged and touched by the cheers.

"It's gone from a hometown float where 2,000 people see you, to the Rose Bowl parade where 30 million people see you," Anne says of her family's personal efforts. "It's pretty cool how this has evolved to help raise funds and awareness."

Elizabeth and Jay have worked through their sorrow about their dad's death to become huge supporters of organ donation.

An avid musician and composer, Jay says he was in his car one warm day with the window down when a breeze touched his face and inspired him to write a song about his dad. Called "Thank You," the song contains the sentiments of many organ recipients when it says, "I want to thank you for the rest of my life."

The gift of life through organ donation brings the Gulotta family comfort and rekindles thoughts for the great times they had before Jay's death.

"Through his memories, I can find hope and peace," says his son.

"It's overwhelming," Anne says of the realization that she'll be beside her late husband's face on that float urging others to give the gift of life.

"While admittedly one of the more unique venues to share the donation message, the Rose Parade has proved to be a great opportunity to position our message and our stories in a remarkably positive way, aimed at families who come together to watch the parade," says Dave Bosch, director of communications for Gift of Hope. "The crowd reaction when our float parades by is everything we could hope for: A quiet hush, followed by clapping and cheering and often a standing ovation."

Founded in 1986 and headquartered in Itasca, the Gift of Hope Organ & Tissue Donor Network is a federally designated not-for-profit agency that has coordinated donations that have saved 17,000 lives improved the lives of hundreds of thousands more.

To find out more about Anne and read the stories of 23 other riders on the float, visit the Web site www.donatelifefloat.org. To register as an organ donor visit www.donatelifellinois.org. To find out more about organ donation, visit www.giftofhope.org.