

The Gift of

Life



Jennifer Lewis holds a photo of her liver donor, Stecil Hopkins, and is joined by her daughter, Rebecca, son, Craig and his wife, Shoshone, and grandchildren, Chase, Jude, and Luke

Katy Donors and Recipients Share Life-Changing Stories

Written by Wendy Clark
Select Photography by Suzi Issa

Right now across the U.S., over 96,000 people are waiting for organ and tissue transplants, according to Donate Life Texas. Over 7,000 of those waiting for life-saving transplants live in Texas. Katy Magazine is honored to share with you the personal stories of Katyites who have successfully donated and received organ transplants.

Searching for a Cure

In late 1995, Jennifer Lewis caught the flu. A week later, she began experiencing swelling in her lower extremities. Concerned, her husband took her to the hospital, where she learned her blood count was abnormal. Soon after, she fell into a coma. When she awoke a few days later, she was stunned to hear the voices of her doctors and family discussing the necessity of a liver transplant.

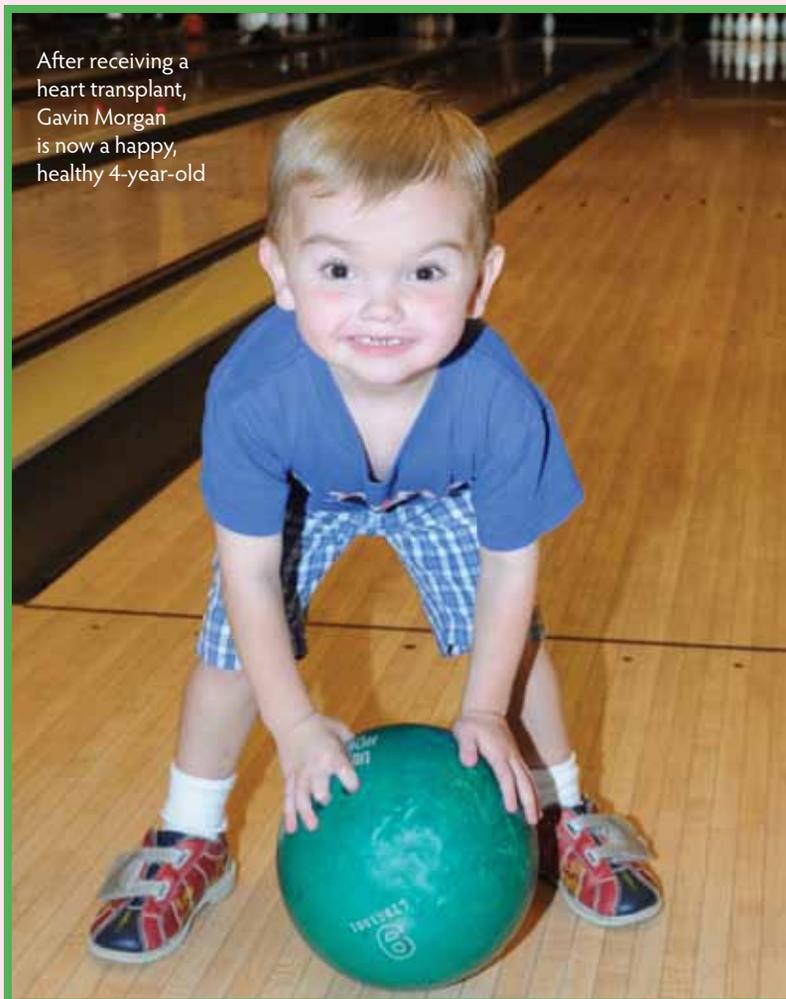
Lewis' doctors deduced that she had contracted hepatitis C from a blood transfusion she had received in 1984, before mandatory blood screenings were in place to prevent tainted blood from being transfused to a healthy patient. Because Lewis developed several secondary infections from the hepatitis, she wasn't placed on the liver transplant list until September 1996. Her family was given a pager and instructions not to travel far from home in case a liver were to become available. It was then, Lewis says, that life changed. "You go through so many emotions," she says. "You have to get past the negative thought that 'someone has to die for me to live.' It's not about that. Sometimes people do die, and it's thanks to the generosity of their donor families that you get a second chance."

Forever Connected, Forever Thankful

On May 20, 1997, Lewis' phone rang and it was the transplant team, who asked her what she was doing. She told them she was barbecuing in her backyard. She will never forget the moment she heard, "Well, you need to stop. We have a liver." After a 12-hour transplant surgery and a week's stay in the hospital, she was allowed to go home to her family. It was then that Lewis encountered a new set of emotions as, over a four-month period, she composed and finally mailed a thank you note to the donor's family. Within two weeks, she received a response.

Lewis' donor had been a 17-year-old boy named Stecil Hopkins, the only child of Stephanie Johnson. Stecil had not been wearing a seatbelt and was killed in a car accident. When approached about organ donation, Stephanie learned that only a small percentage of African Americans choose to donate organs. She told Lewis it had been difficult to decide, but that she wanted Stecil to live on in others. Because of her decision, six lives were saved, including Lewis'. Today, Lewis and Stephanie Hopkins are close friends. They are actively involved in each others' lives and call and write each other often. Each letter ends with the closing, "Forever connected."

Janet Tran, pictured with her nieces, was blessed to receive a second kidney transplant after the first failed



After receiving a heart transplant, Gavin Morgan is now a happy, healthy 4-year-old

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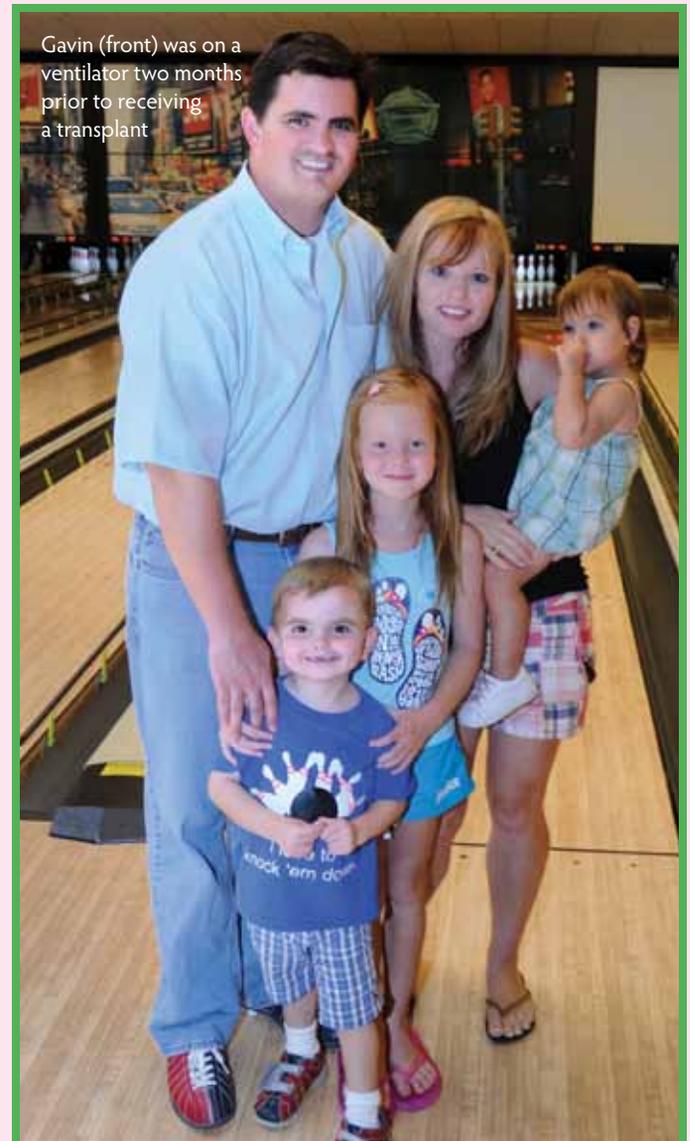
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As a Katy resident for over 24 years, Lewis is a mom of three, grandmother of three boys, and is expecting her first granddaughter this year. She is a champion of organ donation awareness and frequently serves as a guest speaker at community functions. In April, she appeared with Stephanie Hopkins on *Great Day Houston* with Deborah Duncan to share her experience. "It doesn't matter who you are," says Lewis. "A person is a person. If you can give life, talk to your family and let them know of your decision. Everyone needs to understand that one day, you will know someone who needs an organ – be it a close friend or family member."

A Fighter with Heart

Tiny Katyite, Gavin Morgan wasn't born yet when doctors diagnosed him with a large ventricular septal defect (VSD), a hole in the wall of the ventricle of his heart. His mom, Heather was referred to a team of prenatal specialists at Texas Children's Hospital who kept a close eye on her and Gavin for the remainder of her pregnancy. At birth, doctors located what appeared to be an aneurysm near Gavin's heart that they thought might contribute to cardiomyopathy, which is death of the muscle tissue of the heart. Gavin was sent home, but within six weeks, he was back at Texas Children's when his parents were concerned about his frequent "panic" crying attacks. After tests, the doctors told Heather that Gavin's heart was three times its normal size and that he would need a transplant.



Gavin (front) was on a ventilator two months prior to receiving a transplant

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Immediately, Gavin was placed on a ventilator and sedated to try and alleviate the stress on his heart, which had suffered major damage from consistently beating 230 times per minute to try and maintain circulation. Gavin waited two months on a ventilator for a heart, and nearing Christmas, arrangements were made for him to receive a Berlin heart, an artificial pump that is surgically attached to the outside of the chest while a donor heart is found. Not long after it arrived from Germany, doctors moved Gavin to the top of the transplant list, as his own heart had begun deteriorating rapidly. Just hours before the surgery with the Berlin heart, Heather received a call at 4 a.m. that a donor heart had been found. After another month at Texas Children's in recovery, Gavin was sent home at Easter.

Looking Forward to the Future

Today, he is a normal 4-year-old boy who plays with his sisters and is looking forward to kindergarten. He was selected as one of six Katy-area kids to take place in the "topping out" ceremony of Texas Children's Hospital's newly constructed West Campus at I-10 and Greenhouse. Gavin loves bowling and his greatest wish is to "become the best bowler in the world." His parents are grateful that he has been given a second chance at life, Heather shares. "It's still unbelievable to me that someone out there decided to give life in the middle of losing their child."

You have to get past the negative thought that someone has to die for me to live. It's not about that.

Gavin and his family are advocates of organ donation, participating annually in the Living Bank Gala fundraiser in Houston and appearing on college campuses encouraging people to decide to give life. Heather is aware that donation is not an easy decision. "It's understandable to have fears [about donating]," she says, explaining, "You hear stories that sway you, but in the end the misconceptions are not true." She encourages potential donors to do their own research and let others know of their decision.

Twice Blessed

In 1997, after experiencing recurrent bloody noses and an inability to keep any food or liquids down, Janet Tran of Katy was told that her kidney failure would require dialysis treatments until a kidney donor was found. Thankfully, her brother, Zachary was a match, and a year later she received one of his kidneys. In 2001 at a routine check-up, with no acute symptoms present, her doctor sent her to the ICU because her body was rejecting the kidney. "To this day, they don't know why my kidney failed," says Tran. "I was told that it's common in the Asian and black communities."

Dialysis began again, and Tran struggled to keep her full-time job while receiving treatments three times a week. After a year of being on the donor list with no leads, she called to check the status of her name on the list. It was then she was told she had never been listed. Discouraged, Tran knew the wait would be longer than average because of her

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Common *Donation* Myths

Donate Life Texas Gives the Facts About Organ and Tissue Donation

MYTH: If you are in an accident and the hospital knows you want to be a donor, they will not try hard to save your life.

FACT: Organ and tissue recovery takes place after all efforts to save your life have been made and you have been declared legally dead. The medical team treating you is also completely separate from the transplant team.

MYTH: Many religions do not support donation.

FACT: Most mainstream, organized religions approve of organ, tissue, and eye donation and consider it an act of charity.

MYTH: You are too young or too old for donation.

FACT: Organs may be donated from newborns on up, and tissues have been recovered from individuals in their 80s. Medical professionals will determine whether your organs or tissues are usable at the time of your death.

MYTH: Because you have a history of medical illness, no one will want your organs or tissues.

FACT: At the time of your death, medical professionals will determine whether your organs and tissues are usable. With recent advances in transplantation, more people than ever before can be donors.

MYTH: Only your heart, liver, and kidneys can be transplanted.

FACT: Organs that can be donated include the heart, kidneys, pancreas, lungs, liver, and intestines. Tissues that can be donated include the corneas, skin, bone, heart valves, and tendons.

MYTH: Donation will mutilate your body.

FACT: Donated organs and tissues are removed surgically in a routine operation that won't disfigure your body or change the way it looks in a casket.

MYTH: Your family will be charged for donating your organs or tissues.

FACT: No costs directly related to organ or tissue donation are passed on to the family. A nonprofit organ procurement organization will pay these costs.

MYTH: Wealthy people and celebrities are moved to the top of the waiting list faster than others.

FACT: The organ and tissue allocation and distribution system is blind to wealth and social status. The time it takes to receive a transplant is governed by many factors, including blood type, length of time on the waiting list, severity of illness, and other medical criteria.

-Adapted from donatelifetexas.org

Where to Find Katy Magazine

Look for Katy Magazine at these fine area establishments:

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Katy, TX 77449

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In honor of the wonderful donor family that gave Matt a second chance at life, the Katsarelis family encourages everyone reading this to register at donatelifetexas.org and tell your next of kin your wishes to be a donor.

Our Easter Miracle

Organ Donation Hits Home with the Katy Magazine Family

Katy Magazine publishers, Matt and Katrina Katsarelis and their two teenage children know the importance of organ donation first hand. Matt had been struggling with end stage liver disease for many years due to hepatitis C that he contracted from a blood transfusion in the '80s. Matt was added to the UNOS organ donor waiting list in 2008. Over the years, Matt's condition worsened until he was admitted to Methodist Hospital on April 1, 2010. The doctors told him his kidneys were also showing signs of failure. On Easter morning (April 4), while still in the hospital, Matt was told that a liver had been found. "I was overwhelmed, emotional, and so grateful to God and the donor family," says Matt. Later that evening, Matt underwent a five-hour transplant that saved his life. "Thanks to this gift, I will be here to walk our daughter down the aisle one day, watch our son graduate from high school, and so much more," says Matt. The Katsarelis family is happy to report that Matt is recovering nicely and has an excellent prognosis. They would like to thank the community for all their prayers and support through this journey.



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blood type. Finally, on Thanksgiving Day of 2004, she got the call that a kidney was available. "My first thought was that I was glad I just had a big meal," she says. But then, a tidal wave of emotions hit, and she found herself worried. "I didn't want to get my hopes up," she recalls, adding, "As we were driving to the hospital, I started to get nervous, but it didn't really hit me until they were rolling me down into surgery and I just started to cry. I'm not really sure if it was because I was scared or happy or just for the fact that I was given another chance."

It's been six years since Tran's second transplant, and she is doing well. She lives in Katy and works as an accounts payable supervisor for a drilling company. She is once again able to travel, though she maintains a strict daily regimen of medications to keep her body from rejecting her new kidney and endures monthly blood tests to be sure everything is okay. "My advice to anyone considering organ donation is to just do it, because so many people can benefit from it," she says, adding, "Two kidneys can save two lives. It can give people like me a normal life again. So many people die waiting on the transplant list every minute. I was just very fortunate twice."

Giving to Heal Another

Tony and Caroleen Barnette, Katy residents for over 30 years, experienced the unspeakable loss of their son, Christopher "Jason" in a car accident in August 1987, when he was just 7 years old. Understandably, his parents were devastated. In the middle of her shock and pain, Carol was approached about donating Jason's corneas, parts of his eyes that would enable recipients to see for the first time. At first, his parents were fearful of the process. "I didn't want anyone to touch my beautiful baby with his beautiful smile and deep blue eyes," says Carol, adding, "But you don't have much time

to think. The donation has to be quick. I didn't know at the time if what I did was the right thing."

Carol decided to go ahead with the procedure. "In a way, I wanted Jason to live on, even if in someone else," she says. "I still didn't know if I made the right decision until later, when I received a letter [from the eye bank] telling me that, for the first time in their lives, two children could see." Carol wants donor families to know that the decision to donate is not easy, especially if the donor is your child. "I think I did the right thing, and [that] Jason would have wanted it, too," she says.

Sharing More than Family History

When Katy mom, Isabel Urquieta was pregnant with her third child, doctors told her that her unborn baby had polycystic kidney disease and that her husband and older kids should be tested for the disease, as well. Ten-year-old Kariethna was diagnosed, too, and her family was told that she would need a new kidney. Isabel was found to be a match, and the pair will undergo the surgery later this year or sometime in 2011. Isabel is not nervous about donating her kidney, but expresses concern for her daughter. "I am more afraid that her body will reject the kidney," she says.

Kariethna is an inquisitive fifth grader at Hayes Elementary, loves animals, and may one day become a veterinarian. She is excited about her upcoming surgery, because she knows she will have a better life. **KM**

WENDY CLARK registered as an organ donor after writing this story and has made her wishes known to her husband.



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*Donors are encouraged
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steps to become an
official donor:*

- 1 Join the organ donation registry in Texas by visiting donatelifetexas.org or asking about registration when you renew your driver's license.
- 2 Make sure to tell your friends and family of your decision, so they can let health specialists know if need be.



Supported by family, Isabel Uriquieta will donate her kidney to her oldest daughter, Kariethna in the coming year



Stephanie Hopkins and Jennifer Lewis are close friends who feel forever connected because of organ donation



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