

Donation of special 'gift' means life for local woman

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Staff Writer

A recent donation of a liver has truly been the gift of life for a Georgetown woman.

Earlier this year Andrea Mancuso's health was deteriorating so rapidly from the hepatitis C she contracted 25 years ago, she has no doubt she wouldn't be alive today if not for a liver transplant this summer.

Since the surgery three months ago at Toronto General Hospital, Mancuso, 37, has been well on the road to recovery.

Grateful for her second chance at life, she stresses the importance of being an organ donor.

"I met a lot of people out there that do need transplants and they're still on the waiting list," said Mancuso. "Until you're sick, people don't realize the need. If they can just help one person... It's so important they (donors) were able to give a gift. It's so important to save a life."

She stressed that people need to let their families know they want to be organ donors.

Mancuso was on the waiting list for a new liver for nearly two years, and will never forget the day she got the call from the hospital telling her they had found one.

"I thought it was a telemarketer. I was really stunned, but I think I was more relaxed than Joe (her husband)."

She said her husband rushed her to the hospital in 30 minutes, even before the liver had arrived.

She went into surgery at 9 p.m. July 31 and was back in recovery by 2 a.m. the next day.

"It went smoothly. Everything went well."

She was put on anti-rejection drugs but said she really didn't suffer any complications and within three days she was up walking.

She credits the love and support she

received from family and friends as helping to speed her recovery.

She was home 12 days after the surgery. "I just flew through there," said Mancuso, who has endured illness much of her life.

She was diagnosed with leukemia at the age of seven and went through both chemotherapy and radiation.

She said the treatment was "pretty difficult" but fortunately the disease went into remission. But by the time she was 10 it was back and her doctors told her she needed a bone marrow transplant.

Her younger brother was the donor. Mancuso spent three-and-a-half months at Sloan-Kettering Institute in New York City where she had the successful transplant that cured her of the leukemia. She said she had to have the transplant in the U.S. because it was not yet being done in Canada.

But after returning home to Canada she got chicken pox, became gravely ill and required a transfusion of blood products that, unknown to her, was tainted with hepatitis C.

However, it wasn't until 1995 when she was getting a routine blood test she was told she had the devastating disease.

Mancuso, who was working at Ronald McDonald House in Toronto at the time, said with that news she sunk into a depression.

Not yet experiencing symptoms, she became hyper-vigilant for any symptoms of the disease.

"I was always looking at my eyes because that's where it shows first," said Mancuso.

It wasn't until about four years ago that she started having symptoms.

"My liver was becoming smaller and smaller. I was having a lot of gallstone problems as well."

As time went by her symptoms intensified.

"I was sleeping all the time. I wasn't hun-



Andrea Mancuso, who has hepatitis C, is grateful to the donor of the liver that saved her life earlier this year. Today she is on the road to recovery and wants to get the message out about the importance of organ donation. The Georgetown woman is pictured here with the quilt made by her sister-in-law's mother Julia Clark that contains embroidered patches from family and friends from across Canada. The quilt, co-ordinated by Mancuso's mother Jean Pysklywec, gave her strength while she was in the hospital recovering from the transplant. *Photo by Ted Brown*

gry at all," she said. Just prior to her transplant she said when she did eat all she could have was baby food.

Her abdomen was also full of fluid.

Today, she is well on the road to recovery, but she still has hepatitis C and has been undergoing weekly blood tests and will be having a liver biopsy in the coming weeks to determine if the disease has started to affect her new liver yet.

It's a question of when, she said.

When the disease progresses to a certain point doctors will start treating her with a drug called Pegatron, which has the possibility of curing her of the disease.

"I'm back to day one again. Because I've been so ill my whole life. I go day by day."

She said her last step was to get over the liver transplant, and her next one is to get over the hepatitis C.

"I'm a very positive person. I'm a fighter but you get tired of fighting. I have crying times but my husband is there to support me."

Mancuso urges everyone to consider becoming an organ donor.

Today in Ontario 1,750 patients are on the transplant waiting list. Of those 1,092 are men, 658 are women and 27 are children.

"According to a recent Ipsos-Reid survey, 93 per cent of Ontarians support organ donation. But we also know that the consent rate in this province is only 48 per cent," said Frank Markel, president and CEO of the Trillium Gift of Life Network, which is responsible for planning, promoting and supporting organ and tissue donation across the province. "The reason we hear time and

again that eligible families don't consent to donation is because they don't know what their loved one would have wanted. We want to get people talking about their organ donation wishes today."

"As doctors we see first-hand the life-saving impact organ donation can have on patients and the life-saving impact organ donation can have on patients and the life-changing impact it has on their families," said Dr. David Bach, president of the Ontario Medical Association.

For more information on Trillium Gift of Life Network and organ donation visit www.giftoflife.on.ca.

Holiday deadlines

Readers and advertisers should take note that the *The Independent & Free Press* will have different publication dates and deadlines this week because of the Christmas holidays.

The following is the upcoming publishing schedule and advertising deadlines:

Thursday, Dec. 21 edition

Advertising deadline Wednesday, Dec. 20 at 10 a.m.

Tuesday, Dec. 26 edition (Boxing Day)

Advertising deadline Wednesday, Dec. 20 5 p.m.

The Friday, Dec. 29 and Wednesday, Jan. 3 editions will publish as per the regular schedule.

The Independent & Free Press office will close for the holidays on Friday, Dec. 22 at 3 p.m. and will reopen Wednesday, Dec. 27 at 8:30 a.m.




Andrea Mancuso is shown in Toronto General Hospital two days after her liver transplant. Her mother, Jean Pysklywec holds the quilt containing caring messages and images from family and friends that meant so much to Mancuso. *Submitted photo*



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