

# Ryan's gifts

*He was just a little boy,  
but Ryan Doiges  
ultimate gifts have  
changed people's lives*

BY JENNIFER BROWN  
Staff Writer

As Nancy and Dale Doige turn the pages of a binder dedicated to the spirit of their son Ryan, they pause to read a letter smudged in places by Dale's tears.

It is one of several letters the Aurora family has received from grateful people in the two years since Ryan's sudden death in May 1997. All are thanking the family for the 11 precious gifts Ryan gave them after he died — his organs.

This letter is from a 16-year-old boy who suffered from cystic fibrosis his entire life. His childhood had been crippled by the debilitating respiratory disease, but thanks to the gift from Ryan, he has reclaimed his life.

The teen's gift from Ryan was the double lung transplant he had been waiting for most of his life. Without it, he would have died.

Through the anonymous letter, the boy tells the Doige family he is now able to play hockey, run, rollerblade and has returned to school.

Similar messages came from the other organ recipients, who are now able to live productive lives thanks to Ryan.

"We have written back. It was difficult, but very healing at the same time. It means Ryan hasn't been forgotten, he lives on," said Dale, who remembers crying over the typewriter as she composed a response.

The grief he and his wife bear each day is still evident, but they do have the reward of the letters that continue to arrive.

"We go by his room and he isn't there and we walk through the house and miss him, but we know he gave a lot," Dale said. "And it's not just the lifesaving Ryan gave, but the quality of life. He's done something most people won't do and that's save a life."

Although the letters are emotionally difficult to read, the Doiges find comfort in the knowledge their son has given life to many others through organ donation, and the nightmare that began two years ago has a positive side.

May 1, 1997 started out as an average day in the Doige household. Ryan and his sister Jamie, now 8, were busy getting ready for school.

Ryan had been to scouts the night before and the healthy, energetic 10-year-old was preparing for camp that weekend. Dale was listening to the soothing buzz of his children deciding what to do with his day off.

Suddenly Ryan complained of a headache and said he wanted to lie down. But it became clear to his parents that this was no ordinary headache.

"He was having trouble speaking and started sweating profusely," recalled Dale. "One of his pupils was dilated and he was



STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

Nancy and Dale Doige, and their daughter Jamie, cherish the letters they have received (such as the one above) from people who received their son Ryan's organs after his sudden death last May.

very pale. We decided we'd better get to the hospital right away."

The family raced to York County Hospital, where it was decided almost immediately that Ryan should be transported to Sick Children's Hospital in Toronto.

A few hours later, Ryan was placed on a life-support system. He had suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage and was declared clinically brain dead. The Doiges were plunged into a parent's worst nightmare. They asked doctors if anything more could be done for their son, but the answer was no.

That's when doctors approached the family about donating Ryan's organs.

Although it was a decision they would have made anyway, their approval was easier knowing Ryan believed strongly in organ donation.

Just weeks before he died, Ryan had seen his father placing an insurance renewal card in his wallet, along with an organ donor card. Ever-inquisitive, Ryan asked what it was and, once he understood, promptly began a mini-campaign to get family members to sign their organ donor cards.

"It was so simple to him — why wouldn't you want to donate if it would help someone else?" recalled Nancy.

So when doctors asked Nancy and Dale to make the difficult decision, they looked at each other and decided almost instantly it was what Ryan would have wanted.

"Our spirituality tells us the body is just the container, and that made perfect sense to Ryan, too. And now we know Ryan is somewhere else," said Dale.

Later that day, the family and some close friends gathered around Ryan's hospital bed and, together with their church minister, held a service for him and said their good-byes.

Throughout the night, doctors and officials with the Multiple Organ Retrieval and Exchange (MORE) program worked to organize the life-saving transplants that would take place the next day.

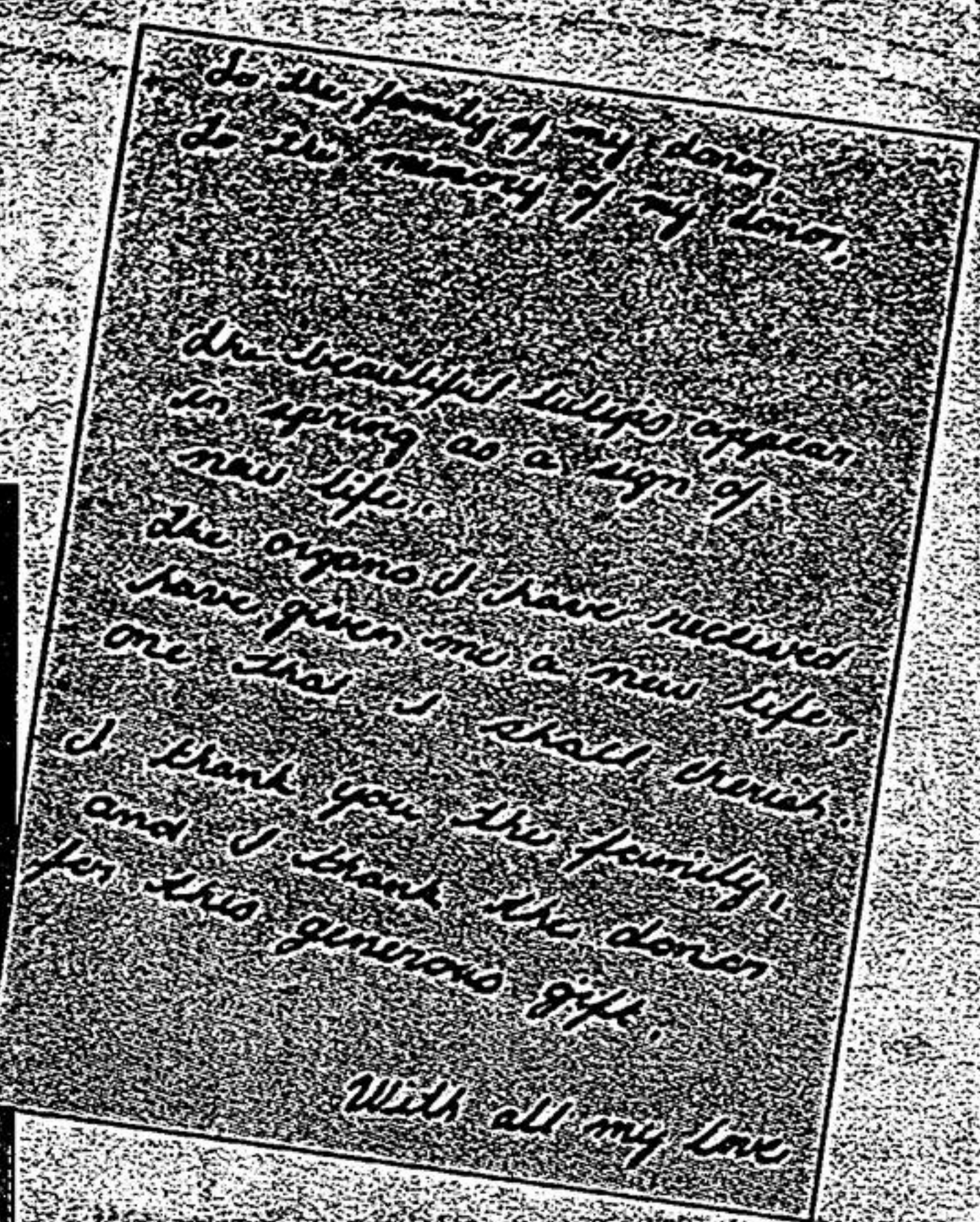
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Eleven of Ryan's organs, including his corneas, were donated. Four of his heart valves were frozen for later use.

The Human Tissues Gift Act requires that organ donation remain completely anonymous, but the MORE program informs families about the organs used, the age and sex of the recipients, and their condition following the transplant.

Through MORE, the organ recipients may also write to their donor families and donor families may write to the recipients.

In September 1997, the family received their first letter, from a 20-year-old university student thanking them for his gift of



## ORGAN DONATION FACTS

• Only 2 per cent of all deaths are eligible for organ donation. They must be brain deaths occurring through trauma or spontaneous cerebral hemorrhage, stroke.

• At St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto, there are only 40 potential donors per year, but only one-quarter of those consent to organ donation. At Sick Children's Hospital, 40 per cent of potential donors actually decide to donate organs.

• The total number of organ donors in Ontario last year was 152 — the total number of transplants was 666.

• The number of people waiting on the transplant list as of Dec. 31, 1998 was 1,051.

• At the current level of organ donation, many people will die waiting for organs.

• Most major religions approve of organ donation.

sight. He had received one of Ryan's corneas and the other was provided to another man.

"We were really touched by that," said Nancy. "It's always very emotional when you get their letters."

The other letters followed. A note arrived from the recipient of his kidney/pancreas, a young woman of 30 who had diabetes since she was five, and had spent many hours a day hooked up to dialysis for the past few years. She is now free from insulin and dialysis and able to work full time.

A six-year-old girl who received Ryan's other kidney is also doing well.

A 42-year-old woman with young children who needed a liver transplant is also thriving, thanks to Ryan. Amazingly, none of the recipients have experienced rejection of the organs.

Dale and Nancy want to encourage other families to talk about organ donation, and make their wishes clear to their loved ones. With Organ Donor Awareness Week approaching, they feel it is a good time to address the subject.

"Even though you sign your card, you have to make sure people around you know. It is up to the family," said Nancy, who believes the issue should be talked about in schools.

This year, the Hospital for Sick Children will be presenting donor families with a Gift of Life medal, developed by the Canadian Association of Transplantation and the Canadian Society of Transplantation as part of National Organ and Tissue Donor Awareness week.

The medal will be awarded to the Doiges April 21.

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