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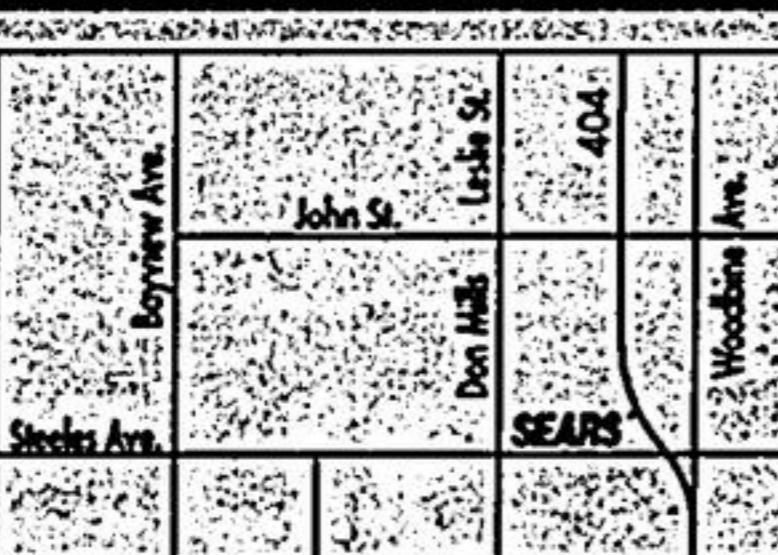
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Transplant recipient walking to urge government to form national registry
Phone call saved his life

BY DAWN LIERSCH
Staff Writer

George Marcello was dragging himself down the road in the town of Chatham, extremely ill after being exposed to E.coli bacteria during travels near Lake Erie.

He was plodding along, left without a driver for nine days, trying to fight off the despair creeping in, when he saw a light at the end of the tunnel.

Three young people stopped to pick him up in their vehicle, nursed him back to health and have joined the Toronto resident in his cross-country trek to raise awareness about the need to increase organ and tissue donations in Canada.

"They're my angels," he said. It's actions such as that — the overwhelming support and inspirational people he has met — that have helped him brave his uphill battle.

Marcello received a warm welcome at a stop in Richmond Hill Sunday. Organ recipients, donors and hospital staff met him at 16th Avenue and Bathurst Street and joined him in his walk to York Central Hospital, where he spoke about his trek.

Marcello explained his goal is to enlist people to lobby the federal government to create a national registry for organ and tissue donations.

Much needed organs are often available, but in half the cases, the family of the deceased will veto the request to have organs donated.

"I believe in the individual's rights and freedom. There are many Canadians who really want to donate their organs as a way of leaving something posi-



George Marcello is carrying his torch for organ donor awareness in York Region this week.

tive behind — those wishes should be carried out," he said.

"I can't believe we've had thousands of organs that couldn't be used. Thousands of people could be alive today."

And Marcello is particularly motivated by the fact he's alive today thanks to a liver transplant in August 1995.

Marcello, who was dying of liver disease, was arranging his funeral, when he received the phone call that saved his life.

"It was a miracle," he said.

Marcello, a fitness trainer, decided to show his thanks by walking from Toronto to Ottawa to make a wish at the eternal flame that more people would be able to receive transplants.

Public response prompted Marcello to organize a walk across Ontario, walking 2,775 kilometres over 96 days last year. From that endeavour, the idea of a cross-Canada walk was born.

Marcello began his trek, called the Canada 500-Day Walk, in Toronto June 20 and hopes to complete it by Dec. 1, 2001.

While in Vancouver next summer, members of the Armed Forces have offered to fly Marcello around the world in a Hercules plane, making stops in numerous countries so he can spread his message globally.

Marcello has garnered support from Ontario Premier Mike Harris, who has created the Premier's Advisory Board on Organ and Tissue donation, with a goal of doubling the number of donations in Ontario by 2005.

Under legislation to be introduced this fall, hospitals will have to report all brain deaths to a newly created central agency to determine if organs are suitable for transplant.

Although Marcello said the province is on the right track, he believes the plan should only serve as a complement to a national registry.

"I don't think we should have a system and procedure where we have to approach a family during a time of shock or grief when a loved one has most likely died in a tragic accident," he said. "If we had a registry, we wouldn't need to approach the families like that."

During his trek, Marcello is hoping to convince each community he visits to create a committee to organize an annual walk to raise money for education about organ donations.

George Marcello arrives at the Markham town hall Sunday at 1 p.m. For more information, call (416) 658-3936 or contact his website at www.stepbystep.ca

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