

A Father's Gift, A Nurse's Calling

By Lorraine Brooks, BSN, RN

2026 Joan Heimler Legacy of Life Scholarship Award Recipient

On November 29, 2022, at 6:48 a.m., I received the phone call that forever changed my life. My father, a healthy 54-year-old, experienced sudden cardiac arrest while running with my mother and friends. CPR was started immediately, and when EMS arrived, they were able to restart his heart. Despite lifesaving interventions, the lack of oxygen had already caused devastating brain injury.

When I arrived at the emergency department, I saw my father intubated, receiving several life-sustaining medications while my mother, his middle school sweetheart and best friend, sat at his bedside, holding his hand in tears. The strongest, happiest person in my life, now had machines and medications surrounding him, keeping him alive. In that moment, I experienced healthcare in a way I never had before. I was not there as a caregiver, but as a daughter.

Over the following days, our family waited and prayed for a miracle. My medical experience allowed me to better understand the severity of his condition, and we knew the outcome might not be what we hoped for. Throughout those days, the compassion and professionalism of the care team left a lasting impression. They answered our questions with patience, comforted us when words felt impossible, went above and beyond, and treated my father with dignity in every moment.

As we awaited EEG and MRI results to determine if any brain activity remained, our family faced an emotional conflict that is impossible to fully describe. My father was always laughing and full of life. He found joy in golfing, running, pickleball, and most of all cherished time with family and friends. He was incredibly selfless, always putting others first, and had a way of making everyone around him feel appreciated and smile. The orange donor symbol on his driver's license was a quiet reflection of the selfless person he had always been. My mother, brother, and I knew that living in a vegetative state would not reflect the life he loved so deeply. On December 2nd at 1343, he was pronounced brain dead, and in that moment, we knew exactly what he would have wanted. Through organ donation, he saved five lives and improved many others through his eye and tissue donations. Even in death, my father gave everything he could to help others.

His honor walk was unforgettable. More than 250 people lined the hallways. The route had to be extended to accommodate everyone who came to show their respect. Family, friends, nurses, and physicians stood quietly as he was wheeled down the hallway. In the midst of unimaginable grief, it was one of the most meaningful moments our family experienced. While losing my father was devastating, knowing he gave others a second chance at life brought light to an otherwise unimaginable loss. This experience profoundly shaped my path as a nurse.

Today, I work as a Registered Nurse in the Emergency Department, where patients and families face some of the most unexpected and devastating moments of their lives. Cardiac arrests, traumatic injuries, neurological emergencies, and other critical conditions can quickly lead to end-of-life circumstances. Because of my experiences, I approach these situations with a deeper level of empathy and understanding. I know how it feels standing at the bedside of someone you love, while trying to

process overwhelming information and make unimaginable decisions. I often think about the nurses who cared for my dad. They taught me that sometimes the most meaningful thing a nurse can provide is not just medical care, but patience, comfort, and reassurance during life's most difficult moments. I strive to provide that same level of care to every patient and family I encounter.

In 2023, I shared a post honoring my father's donor day anniversary. A coworker reached out to share an opportunity to become our department's Versiti Liaison/Donor Champion. I knew this role was more than just an opportunity. It felt like a calling, deeply connected to both my personal experiences and the direction of my professional journey.

In this role, I focus on educating staff about referral guidelines, increasing awareness of the donation process, and breaking down barriers and misconceptions. By helping staff better understand both the clinical process and the profound impact donation can have, we can ensure every patient who has the potential to be a donor is given that opportunity. One area I have been especially passionate about is improving staff awareness and participation in honor walks. Through education and discussion in our department, staff participation has grown significantly. Honor walks have given staff a deeper understanding, and we now frequently have 10 to 15 staff members present to honor donors and support their families. Beyond my work in the hospital, my family and I organize an annual golf outing in my father's name, aiming to bring people together, raise awareness, and educate our community on the lifesaving impact of becoming a donor.

Through these experiences, I have come to understand how essential nurses are in the organ donation process. Nurses are often the primary support for families during end-of-life care. Our ability to provide compassionate care, clear communication, and collaboration with organ procurement organizations can make an immeasurable difference during one of the most difficult decisions a family may face. In the future, I plan to continue expanding my knowledge in emergency nursing, with organ donation at the center of my passion. Through my involvement in site shared governance, ED shared governance, Versiti Liaison/Donor Champion, and as chair of Engagement Committee, I plan to turn this passion into meaningful change at a hospital level. I will bring new ideas and best practices to strengthen donation education and improve support for patients and families during incredibly challenging times.

My father's legacy lives on not only through the lives he saved, but through the work I now do as a nurse. His story reminds me that even in the most difficult moments, compassion and advocacy can transform tragedy into hope, and the gift of life continues far beyond the bedside.