

Beyond the Bedside: Shaping a Career through Organ Donation

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2025 Joan Heimler Legacy of Life Scholarship Award Recipient

I started in the ICU as a new grad nurse. My first encounter with organ donation occurred during my orientation, and it has helped shape my nursing career ever since. I remember having a young patient who was close to my own age, and her family was always at the bedside, hopeful. On my third day with the patient, I remember doing my morning assessment, which was the same each day prior. Then, when I went to administer the scheduled morning eye drops, I noticed unequal pupils, with one being nonreactive. I updated the provider, and we quickly proceeded with a stat scan. I remember feeling proud of myself for catching this significant neuro change and marveling at how quickly the body could change.

I remember coming back from the scan to find the family anxiously waiting in the room, asking for updates. At that moment, I received a call in my earpiece from the radiologist, updating me on the scan results and requesting to speak with the provider as soon as possible. I tried to be mindful of my body language while on the call, not wanting to concern the family. I'll never forget sitting in the room while the provider discussed the scan results and the brain death testing that would follow. I remember sitting there during the apnea test, feeling the hopefulness in the father as he agonizingly waited and willed his daughter to take a breath. I'll also never forget the moment when the family decided they wanted to proceed with organ donation. They viewed it as a way for their last memories with their daughter to be something positive.

This experience has shaped my nursing career in many ways. I have loved being part of organ donation cases at my hospital, but it has also opened my eyes to misconceptions about organ donation within my community. Not only are there cultural misconceptions, but there are also many misconceptions among healthcare workers. After the COVID pandemic, I had the opportunity to become a Donor Champion for my hospital. At the time the previous Donor Champion had retired so I was unsure what exactly I was getting involved in. I love working at the bedside, but being a Donor Champion has inspired me to do more. I have worked closely with our liaison to help educate our staff and break down barriers that have affected our organ donation process. With the help of Versiti, we have been able to identify organ donation disparities between cultures in our community since we have a heavily minority population. We have worked with hospital administration to raise awareness about organ donation needs in these communities on our hospital's social media platforms.

I have been able to inspire other coworkers to get involved with organ donation, and now we have multiple Donor Champions, frequent meetings, as well as coworkers who volunteer to help during Donate Life Month. This year, my focus is to branch out beyond the nursing department and help each department in the hospital understand how integral they are to the organ donation process—from environmental services to security, transport, and beyond. We all play a role in the process and the experience for the families. By showcasing this, I hope to inspire more of our community to get involved.

In the future, I would like to help support more community outreach efforts between my hospital and organ donation initiatives in our area. Being exposed to that first experience has deeply impacted my nursing career and has provided a passion that I can see lasting well beyond my years as a nurse.