

Organ donor
Melinda Serrano
with recipient—
and friend—John
Montelongo.



“She gave me a second chance to live”

Why donating your organs could be the best thing you ever did.
By Lisa Fields

CHANCES ARE YOU haven't thought much about organ donation, but 15 percent of people awaiting transplants in the States are Latino, a percentage that jumped 260 percent from 1993 to 2002. Over the past few years, close to 1,000 Hispanics have died annually while waiting for an organ. But it doesn't have to be that way: A living donor can safely give a kidney or part of a liver, intestine or pancreas to a loved one (just 1 in 50,000 die while donating). Unfortunately, not every patient knows someone who can donate. Those people wait for a living donor to volunteer or for a registered donor to die.

Why is it important that we donate? While there's no guarantee that a Latino will receive the organs, being ethnically and genetically similar tends to improve the body's acceptance of a transplant, says Aisha Huertas, spokesperson for Donate Life America. But one recent study found that we volunteer our familia's organs just half the time, while Caucasians do it much more often (77 percent).

“Many Hispanics are hesitant to donate because they worry that if they are in an accident they won't be saved because they are donors, or that they can't have an open-casket funeral or that it's against their religion, although no major religion opposes donation,” Huertas says.

But you could save up to eight lives if your family cooperates with

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your decision to donate. “The evidence is overwhelming that if a family knows a deceased person’s wishes, they follow them,” says Eusebio Alvaro, Ph.D., a research associate professor at Claremont Graduate University who studies Latino donation.

Here, meet three Latinas whose lives were forever changed by organ donation.

Helping a friend

Polycystic kidney disease runs in John Montelongo’s family. Lucky for him, organ donation runs in Melinda Serrano’s: Three years ago, Melinda’s mother donated her father’s organs. Before that, her uncle gave his younger brother a kidney. So when Melinda learned that John, a friend from church, needed a kidney, she volunteered. That made Melinda, 38, of Glendora, California, part of a trend: Although three-quarters of living donors give to family, nonrelated donors have tripled over the past decade.

Melinda’s husband and three kids supported her, but some people asked what would happen if one of her children

needed a kidney. “But what if they don’t and I didn’t give him one?” said Melinda, who is Nicaraguan and Mexican.

So in July, surgeons removed her left kidney by reopening her C-section scar. She has a few pinpoint-sized scars on her belly button and side from the laparoscopic incisions, but says, “It wasn’t difficult at all. Having a baby is a lot harder!” The surgery took about three hours, and she left the hospital after one night.

“She gave me a second chance to live normally,” says John, 49, a Mexican American whose new kidney is still thriving. “I’m grateful that a nonfamily member would even think about donating.”

But it was a no-brainer for Melinda. “We’re born with two kidneys for a reason,” she says. “If you can help somebody live, you should.”

Seeing things clearly

If she’d dodged a little to the left, Gina Gonzales of Dearborn Heights, Michigan, might have avoided an opponent’s finger in her right eye during a high school basketball game in 2003—and kept her sight. “I didn’t understand how severe it was until I heard the word ‘transplant,’” says Gina, Mexican American and now 18, who had membrane and corneal transplants. More than a million bone and tissue transplants (and

about 33,000 corneals) are performed annually. “One person can help as many as 50 with a donation,” says Robert Rigney, CEO of the American Association of Tissue Banks.

She found a donor quickly and had her first surgery a month after the accident, but doctors wanted her eye to heal for a year before transplanting the cornea. “I went back to playing, but I was completely blind in my right eye,” says Gina, who now wears goggles on the court. “My shot, my range—everything was affected. I had to relearn everything.”

Nine months after the last operation, her vision was completely restored. She’s now a freshman at the College of Mount St. Joseph in Cincinnati, where she plays basketball. “I didn’t give much thought to it before, but I signed up

to be a donor. Without a corneal transplant,” she acknowledges, “I wouldn’t be where I am today.”

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A final gift

Marisol Gonzalez knew she’d be visiting her twin, Maribel, in the hospital on October 15, 2004, but she had expected to see her clutching a newborn.

Instead, she found her on life support. While in labor, Maribel had a seizure, then a stroke. Within a day, she lost her baby and was declared brain-dead. “We were planning to celebrate when we got the worst news,” says Marisol, 34, of Sylmar, California.

It was an easy decision to donate her organs. “We never talked about it, but we knew it was on her license,” says Marisol, who is Mexican and Costa Rican. Maribel’s heart, lungs, liver and two kidneys saved five people.

Soon after the funeral, Maribel’s then-11-year-old daughter, Diana—who now lives with Marisol—wanted to meet the person who received her mother’s heart. So their local organ procurement organization connected them with George Jeffery, then 63, who’d had congestive heart failure.

“It’s an extended family,” explains George, who sends birthday cards to Maribel’s family and has visited her grave. “I felt great when I woke up from my transplant, but I was sad that someone had to die for me to have that.”

It’s a bond that has helped the Gonzalezes heal. “Maribel’s death wasn’t a waste,” Marisol says. “Parts of her are living on. It’s the best decision we ever made.” ■

Visit donevida.org and learn how to register to become an organ donor in your state.