

With Love, Pain and Tears... Husband's Tissue Benefits His Wife



Jean Reyes de Gonzalez, formerly Jean Amato, spoke to attendees about her experiences as both a tissue donor family and tissue recipient at the recent MTF Technical Symposium in New Jersey. Jean recently remarried Eladio Gonzalez who accompanied her to the Symposium.

You never know when your life will change. Jean Amato never expected to lose her 32 year old, healthy husband. But on May 30, 2000, John Amato experienced severe chest pain and by the next day, the Simsbury, Connecticut resident was dead from a ruptured aortic aneurysm.

Jean, who works at the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner for the state of Connecticut, was shocked by the whirlwind chain of events that ended with her husband's death. She knew that John wanted to be an organ donor, but because he experienced a cardiac death—his heart stopped beating—he could not donate organs. However, she did agree to donate his tissue, such as bones, ligaments, and corneas.

She was still in shock and somewhat disconcerted by the detailed questions she was asked the next day about his medical and social history. But, despite her discomfort, her professional background helped her understand the importance of this screening, which would assist the organ procurement organization (Hartford-based LifeChoice Donor Services—LCDS) and tissue bank (MTF) in making decisions about the use of John's tissue. She was pleased to learn that both of John's corneas could be used to help people with impaired vision, and that other tissues could be used in many ways.

The month after John's death, Jean began having pain in her left arm. The pain was attributed to a pinched nerve. The pain got worse, it moved into her neck and Jean's range of arm motion was restricted. Over the course of several doctor's visits and diagnostic tests, Jean learned she had a bone spur and herniated disc. Her doctor told her she needed surgery and a bone transplant.

Jean soon began to wonder if it was possible to use a piece of John's donated bone for her transplant. She contacted LCDS, which in turn contacted MTF. The MTF marketing rep was Andy Sessler, who worked with Mrs. Amato's doctor to establish her exact needs. It was determined that John Amato's tissue could be used for Jean's surgery, but the tissue was still in quarantine. As part of its exacting quality assurance procedures, MTF holds tissue in quarantine for an average of 100 days before it can be distributed. This is done to assure that all testing and medical history is complete, and that the tissue is safe for transplant.

While Jean's surgery was originally scheduled for late August or early September, she put off the procedure so that John's tissue could be used. On October 23, 2000, Jean underwent a successful anterior cervical discectomy with fusion. Andy Sessler personally carried the tissue into the hospital that day and Jean received a piece of bone from her late husband.

Her recovery went extremely well. Jean's doctor marveled at how quickly the transplanted bone was absorbed. He noted evidence of bone growth within two weeks, and Jean was discharged from physician's care six months after surgery.

Today, Jean has no more pain. She has full use of her neck and a wide range of motion in her arm. She is as good as new and feels that the use of John's bone contributed to her rapid recovery.

Ironically, Jean never wanted to be an organ or tissue donor prior to John's death. While she honored his wishes for donation, it was not something she herself believed in. But that has changed now and she has become an advocate. "The message needs to get out," she said, "Organ and tissue donation is a gift that is given with love and pain and tears, but it must be done." Jean has spoken on behalf of donation at LCDS and at her church. She even convinced a friend who was afraid to have a bone marrow transplant that it was the right thing to do.

Jean's life has changed significantly since that day in 2000. In the fall of 2002 she was married to Eladio Gonzalez, a police officer she met at work in the medical examiner's office, and she is now Jean Reyes de Gonzalez. She knows that the right decisions came out of her tragedy. "God is always good," she says.