



Teena Smith holds a photo of her son, Joe Reaume, who is seated in the center, as well as a poem written by Sharon Culbreath, who received his heart. Photos by Juliana Knot / HP staff

TOP STORY

A LIFE LOST, ANOTHER SAVED

Heart transplant recipient to meet donor's mother in St. Joseph

By JULIANA KNOT, HP Staff Writer
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ST. JOSEPH — Teena Smith said her son Joe Reaume was a generous person.

At his unexpected death at 41, the Pullman resident said she made the choice he would have – to have his organs donated to people in crisis. By the end of the next day, his heart was beating in Sharon Culbreath's chest.

"I know that's what he would've wanted because that's the type of person he was," Smith said. "He would help everybody."

The two women will meet in-person on Saturday at a St. Joseph restaurant. Using a stethoscope, Smith will hear her son's heart once again.

Culbreath, a 51-year-old from Elkhart, Ind., was diagnosed with congestive heart failure at age 31. She said she began feeling pains as a teenager.

The diagnosis pushed her on a new path. She said she began exercising, eating healthily and taking her prescribed medication. Through her determination, she was able to build back her heart's strength.



Teena Smith stands outside of her Pullman home with some of the items her son's heart recipient, Sharon Culbreath, gave her. Photo by Juliana Knot / HP staff

In 2017, she received a defibrillator, which saved her from dying the following February. Culbreath went to the emergency room three times in 2018 and had three major blood clots in her stomach. She again took a turn for the worse in 2020 and was unable to walk from her house to her car without becoming short of breath. Her doctor directly admitted her to the hospital, where Culbreath heard the worst.

"They said, 'There's nothing else we can do,'" Culbreath remembered.

Culbreath broke down in tears. But the doctors told her that her healthy habits made her a perfect candidate for a heart transplant.

"My faith kicked in, and I said, 'OK, God is going to give me a heart,'" she said.

Her name was third on the list of recipients at St. Vincent Indianapolis and moved up to second after she received a heart balloon pump. Culbreath, her family, friends and church were all praying, but

they knew what they were asking for was bittersweet. Getting a new heart for Culbreath meant somebody else had to die.

As Culbreath waited for her heart, Smith waited in a different hospital holding her son's hand, who was on life support. She had to decide quickly. Smith chose to donate his organs and walked him to the operating room. Nurses lined the hallways, clapping for Reaume's gift and calling him a hero. "He was. He really was," Smith said. "Not only because of his organs. He was a hero to me because I loved him so much."

Reaume's organs – his kidneys and his liver – went on to save three other lives besides Culbreath's.

A letter

Culbreath wrote to Smith six months later.

Because of the pandemic, Culbreath was very isolated and fell into a depression while recovering. She said she prayed for Reaume's family daily.

Her letter included a thank you, an update on her health, a poem and a Build-A-Bear with a recording of Reaume's heartbeat inside.

Smith was overwhelmed.

"If I had to choose somebody to get his heart, I don't think I could choose a better person ..." she said of Culbreath. "She has shown me so much love. She will give (love) to you with no strings attached."

For Smith, it is a comfort to know her son lives on. Culbreath said she lives in gratitude and does everything she can to take care of Reaume's heart.

"I want people to understand that organ donations saves lives," Culbreath said.

Both said they are excited, albeit a little nervous to meet each other Saturday. The stethoscope will be there.

"I want her to be able to hear her son's heartbeat," Culbreath said.