

One heart, two souls



Having just listened to her son's heart, Teena Smith, left, embraces heart recipient Sharon Culbreath of Elkhart on Saturday at a restaurant in St. Joseph. JOSEPH DITS/SOUTH BEND TRIBUNE

Mom meets Elkhart woman whose life donor son saved

Joseph Dits South Bend Tribune | USA TODAY NETWORK

ST. JOSEPH - Two years after her son died at age 41, Teena Smith placed a stethoscope on Sharon Culbreath's chest and heard his beating heart.

Her son, Joseph Reaume, died in October 2020. But, thanks to an organ transplant, his heart lives on within Culbreath.

These two women met and embraced each other for the first time Saturday: the Michigan mother and the Elkhart woman whose life her son's heart had saved. Both were nervous, excited and speechless as they approached each other, then hugged tightly.

"I'm so grateful for you," Culbreath said.

"I could not have picked a better person," Smith replied.

Mere strangers a year ago, they've discovered a kinship through letters and phone calls and now this meeting at a Papa Vino's restaurant in St. Joseph, arranged by the Indi-

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Indiana, Michigan in dire need of organs, tissues

Joseph Dits South Bend Tribune | USA TODAY NETWORK

A total of 1,178 residents in Indiana and 2,371 in Michigan are waiting for an organ transplant as of late October, the [Indiana Donor Network](#) reports.

Of those, 64 Hoosiers and 126 Michigan residents need a heart.

By far, the most needed organ is the kidney, with a waiting list of 956 in Indiana and 2,020 in Michigan. The average wait time for a kidney is three to five years.

Some people are waiting on dual organ transplants.

All of them are among more than 105,600 people on waiting lists nationwide. Officials estimate that an average of 17 people across the country die waiting for a transplant every day. A total of 6,151 transplant candidates died nationwide in 2020 while on the transplant waiting list.

About 60% of people waiting for transplants are minorities.

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Heart

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ana Donor Network.

"I want to let her know she has a whole new family now," Smith said. "Everyone in my family wants to meet her."

Smith brought a handful of family, including her other two children, Todd and Sara, and one of her son's three sons, Joshua. Same for Culbreath, who came with her husband and church friends. She and Culbreath have talked about a cookout next spring with room for even more of the two families.

"It's like I've gained another family," 51-year-old Culbreath also acknowledged, something she appreciates since she was 16 when her mother died in a car crash.

Aside from the heart, Smith's son and Culbreath shared something else. Both had struggled with their health.

Generous son

Smith, who now lives in the small town of Pullman, Mich., just northeast of South Haven, was proud of the person her son had become as he grew up and lived in Kalamazoo - a certified car mechanic, a dad, a generous soul.

But life became troubled. His wife left him. And in his 20s, Reaume started to deal with schizophrenia. Smith said it set in while he was on his own, raising his sons.

"It was like a switch went off, and he was never the same," she recalled.

He'd do well when he was taking his medications. But, as he felt well, he'd stop taking them - also finding it difficult to afford the costly drugs - and then relapse.

Smith said she went through the courts to place him in a Michigan hospital several times for his protection, but he'd leave. He misunderstood what she was trying to do, and it made him angry. "As a parent, I felt like my hands were tied," she said. "There was nothing I could do because he was an adult."

Then, one day, he called her from



Teena Smith, left, listens to her late son's heart beat inside recipient Sharon Culbreath's chest. Both feel like they've gained a family member in the process. JOSEPH DITS/SOUTH BEND TRIBUNE



The late Joseph Reaume with one of his grandchildren. PHOTO PROVIDED BY TEENA SMITH

Florida, having scratched an itch to travel.

About four months later, in October 2020, he died unexpectedly in Florida. Smith spoke with Reaume's three sons, all adults, and, having said a prayer, quickly agreed to donate his still-vital organs. Once she made that decision, she would later write to Culbreath, "A peace came over me."

"I just know that's what he would have wanted because he was always helping people," she said.

She recalls how he'd pull off on a highway to help people struggling with their car. And once, she said, near his home, he saw a little boy digging through the trash for food, then found the boy's mother and learned that they were homeless, lacking any money. Reaume went to the bank, withdrew \$400 and gave it to the young mother.

"He was a really good person," Smith said of her son. "He had a really good heart. There's not a day that goes by when I don't think about what he has done for people."

She went to Florida and was with him in the hospital until surgeons pulled his heart.

'Bittersweet' prayer for a heart

Meanwhile, Culbreath had spent 20 years dealing with her faulty heart. In 2001, chest pains led her to a diagnosis of congenital heart failure. Her doctor told her that she might be a candidate for a heart transplant, but no, she said, she'd rather not. She got on heart medications, started walking regularly and watching her sodium intake.

Her two sisters would eventually be diagnosed with heart failure, too - a sign that it could have been genetic.

In 2018, her doctor recommended inserting a defibrillator in her worsening heart. She didn't agree until he explained that, without it, she could die.

The summer of 2020 started off on a high note as she was newly married to Henry James. But Culbreath also went to the hospital three times with edema

in her legs. Then her chest wouldn't stop hurting. It was hard to breathe - so much so that she could barely walk to her car.

Something, she sensed, was wrong. She called her doctor, and she was admitted to the hospital, where he told her: Her enlarged heart was pumping at just 5% capacity. Without other options, he said she needed to get on a transplant list. Crying, she talked with her friends, who urged her to seek the transplant. She agreed.

So began her "bittersweet" prayer for a heart.

"You know someone has to die for someone to give you a heart," she acknowledged.

In October 2020, she went to Ascension St. Vincent Hospital in Indianapolis, where she spent the first week testing to see if her body would accept a heart transplant.

One night in bed, an hour past midnight, she heard a voice say, "Pray for the surgeon." She answered, "Lord, you be the surgeon." Then staff came in and said they'd found a match.

It takes some doing for a body to accept a foreign organ. Doctors had to insert a pacemaker since her pulse kept dropping. She has dealt at times with the effects of a fickle immune system, high blood pressure and a mild case of coronary artery disease. She said she religiously takes the medications that are needed to keep her body from rejecting her new heart.

But still, Culbreath said, "I'm thankful for all days, good days and bad."

"I'm going to do the best to take care of this heart," she added.

She's more conscious of what she eats. She likes chicken, but she's learning to leave the fatty skin aside, even though, she said, "it's the best part." She's using an air fryer to avoid more fat.

A few times a week, she walks two to three miles at a time in parks, in her neighborhood or on the treadmill at her gym.

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Gratitude both ways

The heart wasn't Reaume's only transplant. His kidneys also saved two people, and his liver saved yet another person, all in their 40s to 60s, Indiana Donor Network spokesman Duane Brodt said.

Culbreath, who's a mother herself to a son, Tyrique, 22, and daughter, Jemetria, 27, said of Smith, "I pray for her and her family every day because I'm so grateful for what she did."

Before the transplant, Culbreath admitted, she was reluctant to become an organ donor. Now she wants to promote donating.

"We need to help as many people as we can because we're not going to use these parts when we leave," she said. "They're just going to deteriorate."

Smith, likewise, finds a kinship between her son and Culbreath, saying: "I couldn't have picked a better candidate. She is so humble. ... She likes to travel, and he always wanted to travel."

Culbreath, who went

to Las Vegas this year and hopes to visit Jamaica next year, agreed, adding, "Oh, his heart is going to travel, because I love to travel."

Organ recipients often send thank-you letters to the family of their loved one's organ donor, with help of the donor organization. Sometimes families respond, but often they don't, Brodt said. Almost a year after the transplant, Culbreath sent a thank-you note. Smith soon responded, knowing that it would be therapeutic.

"It was helpful for me because my son gets to live through her life and her family," she said. "It's something I needed to do for me to move forward." Her sense of motherly loss, she knows, doesn't get less or better. Rather, she learns to live with it.

Last Christmas, Culbreath sent Smith a Build-A-Bear doll. When she pressed the bear's paw, she heard the recording of her son's heart in Culbreath's body. At that point, she hadn't listened to his heartbeat since he was a newborn.

"It was so amazing," Smith said. "It was the best gift I ever received. ... I felt a release, knowing that his heart was beating."

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Teena Smith holds the bear and poem that her son's heart recipient, Sharon Culbreath. Smith says she has found a kinship between her son and Culbreath. JOSEPH DITS/SOUTH BEND TRIBUNE

Organs

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Apart from common organs like livers, pancreases, lungs and intestines, donors also heal people through their tissues. In 2021, nearly 1,400 Hoosiers donated more than 16,000 tissues. A single donor's tissues can help more than 75 people, for example, with skin for burn victims, veins to restore circulation, bones to avoid amputations, heart valves to repair cardiac defects, corneas to restore sight and ligaments, tendons and cartilage to restore mobility.

• **To register as a donor:** Whether you live in Indiana or another state, you can sign up to be an organ and tissue donor at DonatelifeIndiana.org.



Indiana Donor Network is the designated nonprofit organization that coordinates organ and tissue donations in Indiana. PHOTO PROVIDED



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