



## Father of three receives a priceless gift that changed his life

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By Angie Hernandez

"My best friend from elementary school in Mexico appeared at my house and knocked on my door. I was surprised to see him so I asked, 'What are you doing here Alex?' and he responded 'I am here to tell you I am here to give you a kidney.'"

Perhaps the conversation between Victor Manuel Villanueva and his friend Alex do la Torre means nothing to most who are reading this or it is possible they simply do not understand. But to the more than 3,000 men in Illinois who are on a waiting list hoping to receive a life-saving organ transplant that will save their life, this conversation would be their second chance at life. Among these men, 444 of them are Latinos who are waiting for a kidney and hoping for someone to knock on their door with the gift of life.

Villanueva, 33, resident of Melrose Park and father of three children describes how his life was before he received his friend's generous gift, "Every night after I returned home from work and my kids were sleeping I said goodbye to them and kissed them as if it were the last time I would ever see them again because I did not know if I was going to be okay after dialysis the following day."

He also mentioned that if one of his friends from dialysis did not return for treatment, no one asked questions. Everyone already knew what happened. They knew it meant a donor was not found and it was too late. Villanueva's life depended on a machine, and for that reason he spent every day as if it were his last.

Raiza Mendoza, Hispanic Public Relations & Community Outreach Coordinator for the Gift of Hope Organ and Tissue Donor Network says, "The national waiting list for people who are in need of an organ to save their life is approximately 114,500. Many of them are fathers who do not yet know if someone will give them the gift of life and the opportunity to celebrate Father's Day."



Efraín Maldonado con su hijo E.J. quien recibió un trasplante de hígado.  
Efraín maldonado poses with his son E.J. who received a liver transplant.

Mendoza states that if we all join the Illinois donor registry, with time, we would be able to create a happy ending for every father in need of an organ transplant. She also says we would be able to alleviate some of the pain many fathers feel when their children are in need of the gift of life.

In the case of Efrain Maldonado, a resident of Plainfield, his special moment of becoming a father to a set of beautiful twins, Madelyn and E.J., instantly turned to fear after learning of his son's liver problem. "The doctors told me something was wrong, but they did not know what it was. I researched online and tried to figure out what my son could possibly have that made the doctors want to be so sure of. The worst thing he could have had was what my son was diagnosed with."

Maldonado admitted to asking himself why this was happening to him and what he had done wrong to deserve this. But in the end, he had faith and thought everything would turn out okay. "This could happen to anyone, good or bad." After several surgeries and a liver transplant, E.J. is now recuperating.

The knowledge and awareness Maldonado and his wife have gained from this experience has inspired them to help other parents in similar situations. They have also joined the American Liver Foundation and help with fundraising.

In an effort to help others with the similar struggles they once faced, Efrain and his family are providing dinner on Father's Day for those at the Ronald McDonald House, located at 622 W. Deming Pl., Chicago, for the fathers who instead of celebrating that special day are anxiously awaiting an organ transplant. The Ronald McDonald House served as a home and haven to Efrain and his family during E.J.'s time in the hospital.

Thanks to the transplant, Villanueva has a new reality; he no longer depends on dialysis although his children have grown accustomed to asking "Daddy, is it time to go to dialysis?" Grateful for his friend's generosity, Victor can finally say no.

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