



Accepting the gift of life What organ donation means for minorities

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Chicago (August 2012) — Aug. 1 will forever be remembered as an emotional day. A crowd of about sixty people gathered at the Humboldt Park YMCA to commemorate National Minority Donor Awareness Day. There, they witnessed Manuel Avila and Esthela Chumbi meet for the first time.

Avila received Chumbi's husband's heart after he passed away earlier this year.

"It's hard to believe that I can really put my hand on my husband Jorge's heart and feel it beat inside the person that he saved," Chumbi said. "It's really a very special and unique gift."

In a speech he read, Avila expressed his gratitude to Chumbi and her son Eric for their decision to donate Jorge Sangurima's organs.

"One feels great joy upon receiving an organ, but there's also the sadness of knowing that there's a family out there mourning the death of their loved one," Avila said slowly, while trying to hold back tears. Both families were present, along with other donors and recipients sharing their stories to educate others about the critical need for organ and tissue donors. They also encouraged people to join the Illinois Organ/Tissue Donor Registry.

Avila also talked about having his life depend on batteries to keep his heart pumping. Patiently, he waited for a heart transplant, although, as a young man, he never believed he would need one. According to the Illinois Organ/Tissue Donor Registry, minorities make up about 55 percent of the 114,000 people waiting for a transplant, with Hispanics and African-Americans as the two most represented minorities. Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White, who spearheaded the state's donor registry program in the early 1990s, and Dist. 27 Alderman Walter Burnett, also attended the gathering. "There is a long list of people waiting for transplants within multicultural communities," White said. "Since genetic matches between people belonging to the same ethnic group are most successful, it is imperative that people of color become organ and tissue donors."

Hispanic Public Relations and Community Outreach Coordinator for Gift of Hope Organ & Tissue Donor Network Raiza Mendoza also spoke during the meeting. She urged those in attendance to overcome their doubts and fears to help those who are in need of organ transplants. She said that more than 22,000 Latinos are on the U.S. waiting list and more than 850 of those are in Illinois.

"Latinos are the first minorities waiting for a liver and our children are the first minority waiting for a transplant, and yet, the Latino community is the one that register the less," Mendoza said. "We are in a place where we can no longer continue being just part of the problem and the time has arrived for us to be an active part of the solution."

Elena Pérez agrees with Mendoza. Her only son Ramón Hernández died 10 months ago in a motorcycle accident. Because he was a cornea and tissue donor, he was able to help others.

"I was sad about his absence, but at the same time, proud that he made the decision to be a donor, because he gave sight to two people and to many more, health that prolonged their lives," Pérez said. She shared her son's story to motivate other Latinos to "Donate Life" (Dona Vida), as the Gift of Hope motto states.

The event was hosted by Donate Life Illinois/National Kidney Foundation of Illinois; Illinois Eye-Bank; the Secretary of State; the Gift of Hope Organ and Tissue Donor Network; and members from the YMCA. Join the Organ Donor Registry of Illinois online at www.giftofhope.org/espanol, on Facebook or by calling (630) 758-2744.

• Angelica Martinez from The San Jose Group contributed to this report.



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Los nietos de Manuel Ávila le agradecieron a Esthela Chumbi por ayudar a salvarle la vida a su abuelo. Manuel Avila's grandchildren thank Esthela Chumbi for helping to save their grandfather's life.