



CLARENDON HILLS

Soldier takes organ-donation flag around the world in memory of college friend

After 6-month deployment, sergeant presents 'Donate Life' banner to crash victim's parents



By Annemarie Mannion, Chicago Tribune reporter

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Carrying an organ donation flag as he traveled the world, Army Staff Sgt. Eric Tofte planted it in deserts, on beaches and in public squares to honor the memory of a suburban man killed in a bus accident whose donated organs have saved or improved the lives of dozens of others.

Tofte, of Austin, Texas, snapped photos of himself with the white flag emblazoned with the words Donate Life when he visited Kenya, Ethiopia, Kuwait, Thailand and Ireland as part of a six-month deployment.

He wanted to let Cameron Chana's parents and friends know the Clarendon Hills man hasn't been forgotten.

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"He was outgoing, loving, just the nicest person you'd ever want to meet," said Tofte, a member of the Texas National Guard.

This month, after Tofte completed the deployment, he presented the flag and copies of the photos to Robert and Lori Chana.

"We had no idea he was doing it," said Cameron's mother, Lori. "It was an amazing tribute. We were really touched by it."

Cameron Chana, 22, had just graduated from Eastern Illinois University when he was killed in 2009. According to news accounts, the double-decker bus he and others were riding in struck the Interstate Highway 57 overpass on Illinois Highway 16 in Mattoon, just west of Charleston. Chana, who stood about 6-foot-3, and another man, Justin Sleezer, of Yorkville, were facing backward and were killed when their heads struck the overpass.

Tofte met Cameron Chana through Sigma Pi fraternity and has remained in touch with his family.

"We were both tall, goofy, fun-loving guys," Tofte said. "We just became friends."

Tofte was not on the trip that took place in June, three weeks after graduation. About 50 passengers, mostly students from the university in Charleston, were returning on the rented bus after a day of boating at Lake Shelbyville, about 200 miles south of Chicago, when the accident occurred.

When Lori Chana realized that her son, the oldest of three children, was not coming back, she said it was a gift to know that he had wanted his tissue and organs to be donated. His donated organs saved or enhanced the lives of 30 people, according to Gift of Hope, an organ and tissue donor network.

"Cameron had taken all the appropriate measures of his own accord," Lori Chana said. "We were so comforted to know that those were his wishes."

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The family reached out to meet Nathan Dyer, a 58-year-old father and grandfather who said he was weeks from death when he received Cameron Chana's heart. Today, Dyer and Lori Chana speak at health fairs and other events about the importance of registering to become a donor.

"I always bring my stethoscope with me so I can listen to Cameron's heart," Lori Chana said of her meetings with Dyer, who lives in Chicago.

Dyer, who had congestive heart failure and had suffered a heart attack at 34, said he is happy to oblige.

"It's a heart she created," he said. "She or her family can listen to Cameron anytime."

Tofte said that is consistent with the message he wanted his flag travels to convey.

"I wanted to let his family know that we're still thinking of him," Tofte said.

A website where Tofte's photos can be seen is <http://www.cameronchana.org>.

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