

DONATE
Life

Family gives gift of life

In Ontario, more than 1,700 people need an organ transplant. The Rogozynski family helped get three people off that waiting list.

BY ABIGAIL CUKIER
NEWS STAFF

Michael Rogozynski pulled into his driveway at about 12:30 a.m. and took off his seatbelt. As he experienced a seizure, he stepped on the gas instead of the brake. His car spun in circles onto the lawn, making loops in the grass that would still be visible a week later.

The car sped out onto the street at more than 80 kilometres an hour and Michael was catapulted out of the car, as it struck a tree. Michael landed on the hood, his head hitting the tree.



Michael Rogozynski grew up in Thorold, the youngest of eight children. Michael, seen here in a childhood photo, always kept family members and friends laughing.

For more than 24 hours, the critical care team at Hamilton General Hospital does everything in its power to save 28-year-old Michael's life. His tight-knit family – Michael is the youngest of eight children – is gathered, holding vigil.

Machines are keeping the oxygen and blood flowing through Michael's body, but he is brain dead.

After 29 hours, Michael's siblings, parents, friends, cousins, aunts and uncles are at the hospital in various states of sleep. His older sister Tanya, although exhausted, can't sleep and makes her way down the hall to his room.

She kisses him, thinking, 'if this is love, if it could do anything.' Holding his hand, she says, 'It's OK if you go.' She talks about childhood memories and says 'I'll take care of you if you live.'

Tanya falls asleep for only about 10 minutes. Waking up, she feels vibrant. She sees this as a sign from Michael.

Fifteen minutes later, the Rogozynskis are asked to consider organ donation.

"I don't need time, they're not harvesting my son's organs," Michael's mother Pat says.

His father Bill agrees. One of Michael's sisters is angry.

"You just want the bed. It's all about shortages and the budget, but this is my brother's life. We're not giving up that easily," she yells.

Pat sobs, while Bill keeps it inside.

Making the decision more difficult are memories of the exact same hospital room in the exact same hospital four years earlier.

Michael's brother Billy, who is 10 years older, also suffered a seizure while he was walking downstairs. He fell, banged his head and was rushed to the General. Billy is still in a coma.

Because Michael's seizures had only happened in the middle of the night, he still had his driver's licence.

Pat wants to know if Michael is in pain. Nancy Hemrica, the organ donation coordinator for the Trillium Gift of Life Network, answers each of her questions with a soft voice and understanding tone.

Time and again, Nancy must enter a hospital's "family room" and tell stunned family members about organ donation. She is kind and patient, but the window for recovering organs is short.

Every time she approaches a family, she cries. She thinks that the day she doesn't cry, should be the day she stops doing this job.

"It is important the family gets the 'no hope' conversation before they get the transplant conversation," Nancy says. "They have to know their loved one is gone."

"I let them know they have a choice. I share information about the opportunities. I let families know brain death is a rare opportunity. It happens in fewer than two per cent of hospital deaths.

"You can make something positive of a tragedy. You can prevent another mother from sitting beside the bedside of her child."

Tanya thinks donation is the right thing to do.

"We can help another mother have her little boy with her, to play hockey and play soccer still, all the stuff he loved to do," she tells her mother.

"I thought it was the right thing to do," Tanya says almost exactly two years after Michael's death, which occurred May 28, 2004. "He would have been pissed off if we didn't. We had the chance to help another family not go through this. That's the greatest gift of all."

To his friends and family, Michael was a gift.

Born April 21, 1976, he was the kind of person you

wished there were more of in the world, the kind who would stand on his head to make you laugh.

In one photo, Michael, smile wide across his face, dances on a campsite, arms wrapped around an older woman from the neighbouring site. Michael had just met her, but immediately drew her into his fun.

Every year at the cottage, Michael's friends would throw him in the lake and every year, he fell for it.

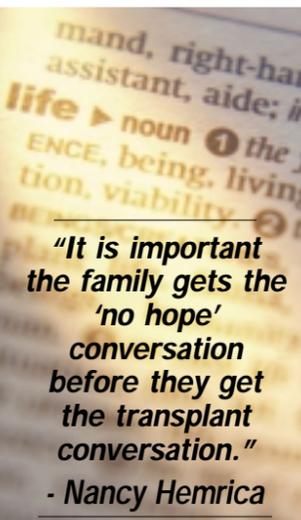
"He was like a kid. He was really, really silly. He always made me laugh," Tanya said.

The two youngest children of a large brood, which also includes Natalie, Julie, Billy Danny, Stephen and Tricia, Tanya and Michael had a tight bond.

"In high school, if I needed a ride at 2 a.m., I could call him. No questions asked, he'd be there."

"I am still learning from him and learning new things he did," she says. "I never heard a bad thing about him."

There's a friend from high school with whom Michael



had lost touch. Speaking to Tanya after Michael's death, he told her he was pursuing a career as a comedian because all that time ago, Michael had made him believe he could.

Michael loved hockey and golf. He played defence for his hometown Thorold team and coached too. He also played soccer and worshipped Wayne Gretzky.

When he died, he was trying to figure out where to go next. He was thinking of going back to school for graphic design.

The last time Tanya saw him was on Mother's Day.

The family got together for brunch at the Beacon Harbourside Resort, right on the water in Jordan.

Michael was sitting on a curb outside the restaurant.

"He was sore from taking a fall while hiking days earlier, so when I approached him he reached his arm out for me to help him up. I remember smiling and laughing as I reached my hand to his. How appropriate that I'd be helping my

younger brother, just like when we were kids," Tanya remembers thinking.

Nine hours passed after the Rogozynskis decided to donate Michael's organs. While hospital staff ran tests, the family stayed with Michael and prayed, laughed, cried and talked to him.

"We wanted him to know how much we loved him and how we were so proud of him. We also had many visitors during this time because we knew it was the last time we all would see him alive."

Tanya walked with him to the elevator doors. She kissed his fingers and said 'I love you.' She ran back to her parents and sister Natalie – leaving Michael for the final time.

This is what Nancy says is most difficult – watching a family say goodbye to a loved one.

"I watch it all the time, the whole thing. Them bending over the bed and then they walk out of the unit themselves. It's a very powerful transition from life to death," she said.

"It's life affirming and affirming of the fact you can't change what happened to that patient, but through the dedicated efforts of many, we've made it mean something to many other people and saved people lives."

Tanya says Nancy is like an extended part of the family.

"Nancy is an angel among us," she says.

Even after they decided to donate, the family needed Nancy more than ever.

Pat asked that Michael be put in his clothes and be wrapped in a blanket. Tanya wanted a rosary put around his wrist during surgery. Pat bought a \$70 belt for him because she remembered he wasn't wearing one.

"All these requests were granted and it gave my mom so much peace," Tanya said. "Nancy deals not just with the facts, but with the heart."

Michael's kidneys and liver saved three people. The cells from his pancreas made another's life better. They may play hockey or swim at the cottage because of the decision Michael's family made.

The Rogozynskis recently received a letter from a recipient family. Although it stirred many emotions, it comforts them to know Michael helped so many people.

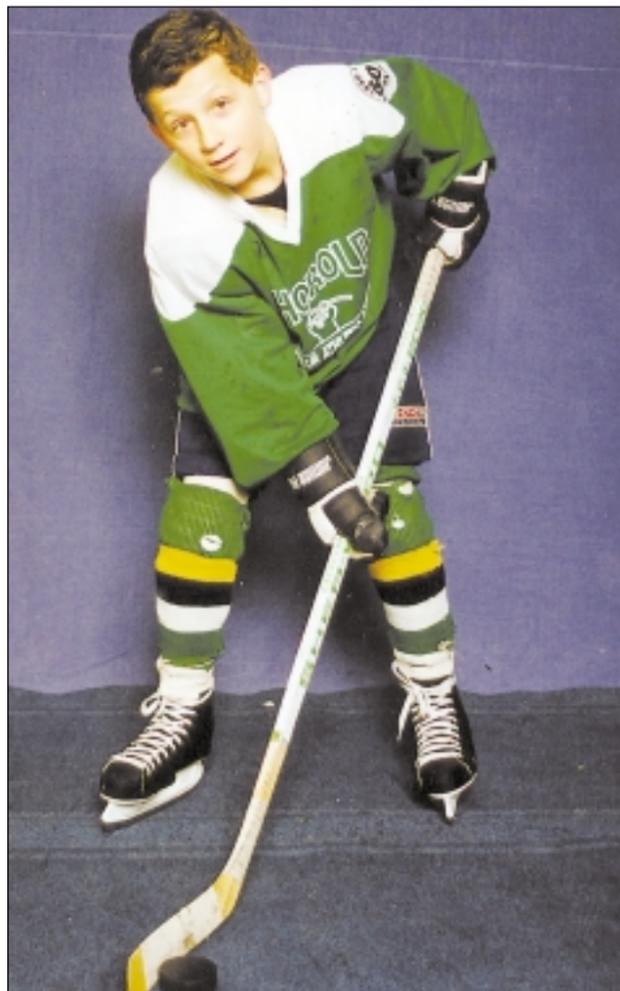
This spring, Tanya was in line at McDonald's and a homeless man asked her for \$2. Instead, she bought him a meal and he joined her and her fiancé at their table.

"I feel like it's my responsibility to do double goodness for Michael," she says.



PHOTO BY ABIGAIL CUKIER

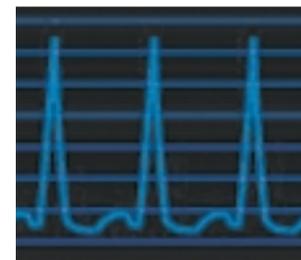
Tanya Bragg knows her family made the right decision by donating her baby brother Michael Rogozynski's organs when he died in 2004.



Michael Rogozynski grew up playing hockey and soccer. He won many awards, but was most proud of his Most Improved Player trophy because it was his team acknowledging his hard work.

"You don't just have to take the bad. It will never, ever, ever be the same, but you can do things to remember them."

There is a poem by an unknown author Tanya likes to remember, part of it goes, "And bury your sorrows in doing good deeds. Miss me, but let me go."



next week....
how Ontario Rates For Organ Donation