

Inviting

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A Lifesaving Decision

In the wake of tragedy, Tom Pangburn and Lynn Pangburn Brunson recognize their son's legacy in the lives of ARORA organ and transplant recipients.

By Barrett Gay | Photography by Rett Peek

Sometimes a simple, thoughtful decision can save lives. Cole Pangburn, a 20-year-old junior at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, chose to be an organ donor through the standardized driver's license renewal process. He later passed away on September 1, 2016, after a tragic moped accident. In the wake of this tragedy, Tom Pangburn and Lynn Pangburn Brunson recognize their son's legacy in the lives of ARORA organ and transplant recipients.

“He was a friend to everybody,” Tom remembers. Cole belonged to the Sigma Nu fraternity, was a skilled golfer and was an active member of New Life Church. “I’ve had so many people say that when they got in a jam, the first person they called was Cole and he’d figure out a way to come help them out with whatever it was – he was just a friend to a lot of folks.”

“I think Cole’s service speaks for itself,” Lynn says. “There were 1,500 people in attendance. That speaks volumes, it’s unbelievable. Cole was just a fine young man. He was a leader and was incredibly funny.”

Tom, a business development manager with Ben E. Keith Foods Mid-South, says what brings him happiness in the midst of this heartache is the fact that Cole made the independent decision to become an organ donor. “We knew that this was Cole’s wish and, beyond the fact that we would have wanted him to be a donor, we were thrilled that this was his decision without our involvement. I can’t begin to tell you the joy our extended family still takes every day in knowing that he lives on in other folks and that he’s helping others live a full life as a result of his gift.”

For more than three decades, Arkansas Regional Organ Recovery Agency’s mission to provide organ and tissue transplants has transformed the lives of Arkansans. Through ARORA, Cole’s organs offered a second chance at life to several recipients. And Tom knows how well the recipients are doing after the transplantations, as he has met one of them. After proper approval to release their names to the recipients’ families, Tom and Lynn had dinner with Cole’s heart recipient and his wife.

“It was surreal,” Tom explains. “He even brought us a tape recording of his heartbeat after the surgery, which was an overwhelming moment for all of us, but it was really cool at the same time.” He adds, “I get a text from him every now and again, and check up on him. He’s doing great.”

Tom notes the remarkable compassion of ARORA in the wake of Cole’s passing. “I can’t begin to tell you how well ARORA handled the conversation during what was obviously a very difficult time for all of us,” Tom says. “They were very sensitive to our grief, but also helped us move swiftly through the process so that maximum potential for helping others could be realized.”

April is Donate Life Month, and nearly 120,000 Americans are awaiting transplants and perspective donors. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that of the 95 percent of U.S. adults who support organ donation, only 54 percent are donors. Through hospital training and public education, ARORA works tirelessly to increase potential organ donors and coordinate more efficient donor recovery.

In the time since Cole’s passing, Tom has become adamant about organ donation. “Tom is a great speaker and has become a tremendous advocate for organ and tissue donation,” says ARORA Director of Communications Audrey Coleman. “I have had the honor of being present during more than one of Tom’s presentations. His words are sincere, heartfelt and personal. It is clear that his donation story is meaningful to listeners and resonates with everyone in the room.”

Tom shares this message to those who have yet to check that box: “Please make the decision to mark yourself as an organ donor the next time you update your driver’s license. You have no idea how much joy it could possibly bring.”