

2015 VOLUNTEERS

Playing it forward through the gift of life

by Jane Palisch, Mid-America Transplant Services (MTS)

Although the human mind can't find sense in the tragedy of losing a loved one well before the opportunity for a full, productive life, the human heart sometimes can see beyond the tragedy to the opportunity to pay (and play) forward the Gift of Life.



Kaden Robert at 15 years

Aaron and Rhonda Robert live each day with not only acute awareness of the precious gifts they received as parents of their two children, Kaden and Claire, but also with a commitment to raise them to develop gratitude for life's gifts, be the best they can be and have a positive impact on the community in which they live. In their tight-knit Benton, Missouri, community Rhonda was amazed and humbled by the support and love they received when in June 2014, an accidental shooting took the life of their 15-year-old son.

"There were 200 people at the hospital when they brought him in...teachers, coaches, friends...and when he was leaving for the transplant center, people lined the hallways into the ambulance bay. They showed us so much love," Rhonda says. Kaden was well-known, well-loved and a leader on his sports teams, in school and in the many activities in which he excelled from a young age. Just a few months prior to the accident, Kaden had shared his decision to be an organ donor. "Kaden was a game-changer. He made a difference everywhere and he's still out there living through others and the way he inspires people," Rhonda explains. "God knew he was a young man that could make a difference."

Kaden was, indeed, a game-changer for the two children and three adults whose lives he saved through organ donation. Rhonda finds comfort and pride in Kaden's generosity and feels that donor families benefit greatly by embracing the gifts their loved one was able to give. "I believe that's what God wants people to do. It's how we save each other," she says.

In gratitude to her community, to honor their son's life and to let others know the goodness that can come from even a tragic loss through the Gift of Life, the Robert Family has been on a year-long journey. With guidance from MTS, the family has honored Kaden and increased organ donation awareness and registry through a whirlwind of endeavors in southeast Missouri where they are preserving Kaden's spirit and emphasizing the importance of "playing it forward."

Rhonda began doing what Kaden would have done — continue fighting, give generously, find the positive outcome and pursue goals with the heart and drive of a champion. Kaden had natural athletic talent. It started with preschool tee-ball, travel and Little League baseball, and the prestigious Baseball Factory Camp (to which he'd been invited). It led to the varsity baseball and JV football he played with an all-in attitude. With his notoriety for athletic excellence and generous gift of life, Rhonda found many opportunities to raise money to endow scholarships in Kaden's name and generate both awareness.

Although the pain of the tragedy persists, the Robert family finds comfort in the five lives Kaden saved with his gift and that, through that gift and the work the family is doing, they are continuing to help others. In less than a year's time, three individuals in the Benton community have become donors. "He was a young donor who has changed the mindset of this community," Rhonda says.

"My son loved life, and he lives on in others. I'm amazed at the impact he had in just a year's time. If I can help a family (in need of a transplant) and keep them from experiencing this pain, I will continue. I'm still not done...I have big plans," Rhonda says.