

Tree of Life – The Interconnectedness of Life

On April 1, as National Donate Life Month kicked-off, the University of Illinois Medical Center at Chicago (UIMCC) unveiled its Tree of Life tribute wall. To date, more than 300 lives have been saved at UIMCC thanks to someone making the generous decision to donate life. In honor of these strong and gracious individuals, UIMCC invited families of all UIC organ/tissue donors, along with many others who are connected through donation. A special tour of the Walter Payton Liver Center was given to all who attended.

Speaking at the event was Illinois Secretary of State, Jesse White; John DeNardo, Executive Director of University of Illinois Medical Center at Chicago; Jerry Anderson, Executive Director of Gift of Hope Organ & Tissue Donor Network; Larry Eppley, Chairman of the University of Illinois Board of Trustees; Paula Allen-Meares, Chancellor of the University of Illinois at Chicago; Roger Grandis, a heart transplant recipient; Megan Herdegen, a double lung transplant recipient; and Adel Zeidan, a liver and kidney transplant recipient. Other special guests included the family of Walter Payton: his wife Connie and two children, Jarrett and Brittney.

“Donor families are truly first among the honored guests,” said Larry Eppley, who also spoke about the meaning behind the *Tree of Life*. “Each branch on the Tree of Life bears and honors the name of a donor. It symbolizes the interconnectedness of all life.” UIC’s Tree of Life represents and honors the life of each donor and the renewed life of all recipients.”

“Gift of Hope has given University of Illinois Medical Center at Chicago the *Life Saving Partners* award for four consecutive years as recognition of its unwavering commitment to saving lives through donation,” said Jerry Anderson, Executive Director of Gift of Hope.

As part of Illinois Secretary of State, Jesse White’s, mission to register more donors and create awareness, his office developed radio and television commercials to air through the month of April and premiered these ads at the event. Two of the individuals featured in the commercials – Megan Herdegen and Roger Grandis – also spoke at the event about the how the gift of donation has changed their lives.

Megan Herdegen received a double lung transplant in July 2007 and has since partnered with Jesse White to help create donor awareness. Thanks to Megan’s donor, she has celebrated her 30th birthday, climbed the Hancock Building in Chicago and been able to watch her nephew grow. “I am living my life now in a way that I had never ever been able to live before.”

“Heroes are more than just fire fighters, police officers and physicians – they are also organ and tissue donors as well as their families. The Tree of Life is a great way to honor these heroes who saved lives with their own lives.” Eppley said.