

# NEW Pittsburgh Courier

## 'The Gift of Life': CORE celebrates week of organ donation awareness

BY Ashley Johnson

August 7, 2013



*ORGAN DONOR ADVOCATE—Donated organ recipient Ron Gooden spends his time passionately speaking about being given a second chance at life through organ donation. (Photo Courtesy of CORE)*

Hampton High School coach Ron Gooden had always been active. He played football through his college career and even some professional. He knew he had a slightly enlarged heart (dilated cardiomyopathy, an enlarged heart with thick walls and a large pumping chamber), which doctors told him was no real concern, and a family history of heart disease, but never did he think there was a chance he would be out of the game of life so soon. But within a few years he went from coaching on the sidelines, to being sidelined and lying on his deathbed waiting for “the gift of life.”

Now thanks to the donation of a heart, Gooden, of North Hills, who almost two years ago was so close to dying, has gotten married, seen his son graduate college and was able to walk his precious daughter down the aisle.

“I’ve been truly blessed to receive this gift of life,” said Gooden. “Everyday is a true blessing. There’s a reason why I received this gift. I know just how being close to the end of life feels. I’ve made it my mission to spread the word about organ and tissue donation.”

While stories like this are few, the need for minority organ donors is so great. Gooden’s story is just being celebrated during the Center for Organ Recovery & Education’s (CORE) recognition of National Minority Donor Awareness Week, Aug. 1-7.

“National Minority Donor Awareness Week is an important opportunity to educate all multi-cultures about organ donation, to dispel the myths and to make an urgent plea on how important it is to become an

organ donor,” said Lisa Upsher, Minority Organ Tissue Transplant Education Program director and Multicultural & Faith Based Community Outreach coordinator for CORE. “It is important to get on board with organ donation because we (minorities) need it the most. There just isn’t enough to go around.”

According to CORE, there are 27,000 African-Americans currently waiting for a life-saving organ transplant in the United States; more than half of the national transplant waiting list is made up of multicultural populations; and African-Americans and other minorities are three times more likely to suffer from end-stage renal disease than Caucasians.

In 1992, Gooden began to feel tired and it was hard just walking up steps, he thought it was just age catching up with him. He had a series of tests and blood work done, and found his CPK enzyme levels were high and his heart was getting larger. He began seeing a cardiologist and in 1996, he was given a defibrillator pacemaker. For a couple years it worked and then in December 2010, he noticed he was retaining a lot of water, so he went back to the cardiologist and he was told he was in heart failure. He was told he had no blockage, but that his heart was weakened. He started a cardiac medicine, but to no avail, his heart had gotten worse. In August 2011 it was decided he should be put on the transplant list and the beginning of October, he said he was in the end stage of life. “It was a struggle to even get out of the bed and go to the bathroom.”

By this time, doctors had decided to try a heart pump, but a week later he was still feeling bad and a blood clot was found in his left ventricle. He was told turning it up could cause a stroke. With nothing else left to do, Gooden was placed at the top of the list in the region. A match was found, but it was in the beginning stages of coronary failure, and if he took it, he’d be back in 10 year for another transplant.

“I was positive, I kept saying, ‘I’m going to get a heart,’” Gooden said. By this time it was Thanksgiving week and he was still waiting and days away from getting married, when he received a call on Nov. 22, 2011 that a heart was found.

“I cried. I was very moved and excited. I told the doctors I was going to make it my mission to spread the word.” And he does. He not only spends his time coaching and with his family, but he travels on behalf of CORE and DonateLife Pa as an organ donation advocate.

Gooden said all he knows about his new heart is that it came from Erie, that it once belonged to a 19-year-old and that the donor’s family lives in Pittsburgh. Although he hasn’t met the family, he said he hopes to one day and would like to develop a relationship with them, but until then he has begun putting something together for CORE to pass onto them.

“I want to know this young person’s hopes and dreams. I’m going to be a good steward to this heart and will cherish it.”

According to Upsher, the stereotypes are some of the largest reasons why minorities do not donate. Stereotypes such as, “if I put it on my driver’s license and have an emergency, doctors will not try to save me,” or “I won’t be able to have an open casket,” or “It’s against my religion.” Upsher says they are all not true. “Our medical teams aren’t looking at driver’s licenses, deciding on whether to say a person or not; it is a simple procedure that does not interfere with casket visitation and 99 percent of religions feel it is a charitable act.”

When asked why he encourages minorities to become organ donors, Gooden said, “People say they want to leave a legacy, what greater gift could you give a family than the gift of life.” And when it comes to the myths, he said, “I put my full confidence in the doctors. I’m a donor, I’ve been a donor and the stereotypes just aren’t true.”

For National Minority Organ Donor Awareness Week Upsher said CORE planned to have a booth at both the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives Training Conference in Pittsburgh and the Shyne Awards.

But Upsher said awareness is not just one week, but every. She said CORE will continue to make a real push for organ donation through public education and having a presence at churches, community events, health fairs and more.

(For more information on CORE, visit [www.CORE.org](http://www.CORE.org).)

<http://www.newpittsburghcourieronline.com/index.php/health/15885-the-gift-of-life-core-celebrates-week-of-organ-donation-awareness>