

Group focuses on organ donation

November 5, 2004

By Ushma Patel
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Dale Gilbert thought they were lucky, until the very end.

His wife, Justina, had liver disease, but she was at the top of the transplant waiting list. She had supportive friends and family, good medical care and insurance. The couple decided they would devote their energy to helping transplant families after her surgery.

Their luck didn't last. After a year and a half, Justina Gilbert died in 2002. She was 54.

Her family decided to carry on with her wishes by creating the TIGER Fund to aid and educate transplant families. "It helps me stay in touch with my feelings about her," said Dale Gilbert, who lives west of Boca Raton.

TIGER is an acronym for Transplant Information Gathering for Education and Research. The fund has helped about 25 people in two years, and it helped sponsor Florida's team to the 2004 U.S. Transplant Games.

Gilbert also works with a University of Miami organ procurement coordinator, the Transplant Foundation in Miami and the Andy Roddick Foundation in Boca Raton.

The TIGER fund focuses on women and children. Its five programs are direct aid, scholarships, a drive to increase organ donations, a stuffed tiger giveaway and Web support to other nonprofit groups involved with liver health.

"I gave my wife a little stuffed tiger in her final months as a kind of support thing," Gilbert said. "It's a symbol of somebody that has control over their environment."

Jack Parker, 42, spent about the same amount of time on the waiting list as Justina Gilbert and received a liver transplant in 1998. Now he visits dialysis units dressed as Santa during the holidays and mentors pretransplant patients.

The TIGER Fund is helping the Coral Springs resident pay tuition at Broward Community College, since the transplant forced him to find a new job.

"I was a sheet metal fabricator. I can't go back to that. I can't do heavy lifting," Parker said.

Parker is also recovering from tonsil cancer that was diagnosed last year, soon after his wedding to his transplant nurse. The TIGER Fund helped pay for Parker's medication. "I just know he's a real nice guy. We get along great and he's doing a good thing," Parker said of Gilbert.

Not everybody is receptive to organ and tissue donation. Some people fear they will receive poor medical care or will be disfigured, said Candy Wilson, a TIGER Fund board member who works in Delray Beach for the Life Alliance Organ Recovery Agency of the University of Miami. "I get

The number of organs recovered this year in Florida stood at 672 as of June 29, but 2,970 people are on the waiting list, according to the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network.

The TIGER Fund has a "Save 50 Lives" campaign to emphasize that one tissue donor can save 50 lives. Wilson said Gilbert's sincerity inspired her to help him.

"I think it speaks a lot for people when they suffer a tragedy and turn it into something positive, and that's what he's doing," she said.

Blanche Roddick, the mother of tennis star Andy Roddick and chairwoman of his foundation, was approached by Gilbert this year.

"We felt, because it's for children and pediatrics ... it was something we would be supportive of," she said.

Roddick will donate some proceeds from the foundation's annual fund-raiser, a dinner-dance and celebrity tennis exhibition in December in Boca Raton, and Blanche said the foundation hopes to be involved in children's events at the Transplant Games.

Gilbert spends two hours a day on the fund. With his growing connections, he hopes to hold organ drives, make the TIGER Fund better known and raise more money.

Natasha Pkhakadze, one of Gilbert's two daughters, feels the Web site's information is the fund's most vital task.

"The financial help is very important, but the information could be life or death if they don't know the right sources or how to take care of themselves," she said. "[The goal] is just to educate and save lives and keep the memory of Justina Gilbert alive."

The fourth annual Andy Roddick Celebrity Charity Weekend will be Dec. 11 and 12 at The Polo Club of Boca Raton. Call 561-706-6776.

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To Get Involved

What: TIGER Fund, Transplant Information Gathering for Education and Research. Focuses on women and children and provides direct aid, scholarships, a drive to increase organ donations, stuffed tiger giveaway and Web support to other nonprofit groups involved with liver health.

How: Donate funds, volunteer, become a transplant mentor or professional liaison

Where: E-mail help@tigerfund.org. Mail to: The TIGER Fund, 21218 St. Andrews Blvd., Suite 641, Boca Raton, FL 33433 or visit the Web site at www.tigerfund.org.

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