

Life amid tragedy: Local teen's organs donated after crash

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One day last year, Lodi High student John Teeslink and his girlfriend, Vanessa McDonald, were driving along when she saw the reference on his driver's license about whether he wanted to be an organ donor.

Teeslink was 17 at the time, so he couldn't officially register with a state-approved nonprofit organ donor network. McDonald told him she just couldn't donate her organs if tragedy should strike.



(Marc Lutz/News-Sentinel)

"It's selfish not to," Teeslink replied in a very direct manner.

Little would McDonald know that her boyfriend would end up dying tragically in a car accident, much less be in a position to donate his organs.

"I'm just so glad we had that little conversation," a grief-stricken McDonald said Monday, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Teeslink, 18, was killed in a head-on collision early Saturday morning on Lower Sacramento Road, between Eight Mile Road and Morada Lane. He lost control of his car and crashed into a 1999 Mazda Protege driven by John Eric Baden, 26, of Stockton.

Hours later, Teeslink's parents, Susan and Roger Teeslink, donated his heart, corneas, ribs and some skin. His contributions saved the lives of three babies and the eyesight of two others, according to McDonald and family members.

"He would have done it if he was alive," his mother, Susan Teeslink said Monday morning. "He's that kind of person."

Donors can save eight lives David Heneghan, a spokesman for the California Transplant Donor Network, applauded the Teeslink family's decision to donate the organs.

"Each one of us has the potential to save eight lives," Heneghan said. "As a tissue donor, we can improve up to 50 lives."

Organ donations at a glance

1,158: People who died waiting for an organ transplant in 2005.

3,244: Organ transplants performed in California in 2005.

19,322: Californians waiting for an organ transplant.

21,215: Deceased organ donors nationwide in 2005.

91,614: People nationwide waiting for transplants.

— Source: *Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network*.

How to register for organ donation

Register online at <http://www.donatelifecalifornia.org/register> or <http://www.ctdn.org>, or tell the California Department of Motor Vehicles if you renew your license after July 1.

— Source: *California Transplant Donor Network*.

It's also a way for families gaining some solace in the wake of a tragedy of this proportion, he said.

"It's like he's living with someone else," McDonald said.

Susan Teeslink said she got a phone call in which the caller asked if she wanted to donate her son's organs. It was an easy decision because she knew her son would want to donate.

Just last year, California became the 40th state to allow people to register as an organ donor online. You can click onto <http://www.donatelifecalifornia.org/register>, answer a series of questions and you're set.

Since the online registry went into effect in April 2005, some 245,000 people registered to be an organ donor, almost 100,000 more than the California Transport Donor Network's goal, Heneghan said.

To ensure that someone isn't playing a practical joke and registering someone without their knowledge, donors are asked their address, date and place of birth, mother's maiden name and driver's license number.

And beginning in July, people renewing their driver's licenses in California will be asked by a Department of Motor Vehicles employee if they want to be an organ donor, Heneghan said. Everyone who says yes will have their information forwarded to the California Transport Donor Network.

"It's about saving lives," Heneghan said.

Nationwide, 91,000 people are waiting for an organ transplant, he added.

Because the heart and lungs are the most critical organs, someone like Teeslink who died on the West Coast can only give those organs to someone also on the West Coast because they can only be outside a body a few hours, Heneghan said.

A pancreas or liver can endure a 12- to 15-hour wait, he said, but kidneys can go all the way to the East Coast because they last 24 to 48 hours, Heneghan said.

"With a heart or lung, it will go to the sickest person on the West Coast," he said.

MySpace broke the news

News of Teeslink's death spread over the weekend on the popular teen Web site, MySpace.com.

One of Teeslink's friends, Andrew Conley, said Monday he saw something on the site from Lodi High with the subject line, "Bulletin — rest in peace."

Conley, also a Lodi High senior, didn't know what the subject line was about, but he knew it wasn't good. After reading the message, Conley text-messaged a friend to confirm that Teeslink had been killed.

"He was one of the last people I thought would get into an accident and die like that," Conley said. "It was a big bummer going to first period knowing he wasn't going to be there."

Another Lodi High senior, Chelcy Gibbons, said she heard about the tragic accident on MySpace as well, but what she read gave no last name.

"I didn't know which John it was until (Monday)," Gibbons said.

Gibbons and Conley also noted that way too many members of Lodi High's senior class have died in accidents this school year. The student body is still reeling from the Christmas Eve deaths of Kelly Garecht and Jaclyn Terry, both 17, in an accident in Lockeford.

"A lot of people are saying our senior year is cursed," Gibbons said.

Teeslink's 15-year-old brother, James, was at his grandparents' house in Lindsay, in the southern San Joaquin Valley, when the phone rang at about 2 a.m. Saturday. It was their father, Roger Teeslink.

Groggy after the phone woke him up, James Teeslink said he was confused about his grandfather's part of the conversation. It never occurred to him that the older brother he looked up to would be in extremely critical condition.

"I thought something was wrong with my dad," James said.

McDonald, John Teeslink's girlfriend, was asleep at her Lodi home when the phone at her house rang at 2 a.m. She got the same news.

"They said he was in very critical condition, and they emphasized 'very,'" McDonald said.

As classes at Lodi High resumed Monday after a two-week spring break, the five school counselors were available for any emotional help a student needed, said Terry Scott, assistant to Principal Bill Atterberry. The counselors have been trained in grief counseling, Scott added. Two Lodi Unified School District psychologists were available as well.

Teachers were notified Monday that they could call any counselor at any time if a student needs emotional help coping with the tragedy, Scott said.

Well-liked on campus

John Teeslink loved people of every generation, ranging from children to senior citizens, McDonald said.

"He knew how to act around everybody," she said. "He loved his grandma and grandpa so much."

For Conley and Gibbons, their hearts are with McDonald. She is in Conley's English and physics classes at Lodi High. Gibbons knows McDonald a lot better than Teeslink.

"They were going out a long time— maybe a year," Gibbons said. "That's a long time for high school."

While Conley is saddened by Teeslink's death, he's looking at it a little differently.

"I'm trying to look at the bright side," he said. "He's in a better place. He doesn't feel the pain."

Accident remains under investigation

The CHP was still investigating the fatal accident on Monday. They know that Teeslink wasn't wearing a seat belt, but officers don't know if wearing a seat belt would have prevented the teenager's injuries and ultimately his death, said CHP spokesman Adrian Quintero.

The CHP hasn't determined whether drugs or alcohol were involved, but family members say they know they weren't in his system because they know that Teeslink didn't drink, smoke or take drugs.

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