

Dedicated to forensic photography Remembering lives saved is motivation in job

Joe Goldeen
Record Staff Writer
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MANTECA -- The phone call can come at any hour.

"Richard, we have a homicide victim. We need you in Fresno as soon as possible."

So no matter what he's doing, Manteca photographer and retired public servant Richard Briggs drops everything, packs his camera equipment and a laptop computer and makes the drive south on Highway 99.

On any given assignment, Briggs, 53, could be summoned to Monterey, the Bay Area or any other point in Northern and Central California. He's usually given about eight hours notice.

The call comes from the California Transplant Donor Network. Briggs is under contract as the donor network's lead forensic photographer. He's called in to a hospital whenever there is a homicide and after both the respective county coroner and the victim's family have given consent for organ donations.

More than 18,500 people are waiting for organ transplants in California at any given time, according to the network. And each day, more than 17 people -- one every 90 minutes -- die in the United States because of a shortage of organ donors.

It's Briggs' job to document through photography and a written report the recovery process for seven vital organs -- the heart, liver, pancreas, two lungs and two kidneys -- that just a few hours later will be transplanted into a patient who in all likelihood would die without the donated organ.

"What Richard does is so important to what we do. His role is a critical step. He satisfies two parties -- the coroner's need for documentation to release that patient for donation and fulfilling, honoring and following through on the wishes of the donor's family," said David Heneghan, spokesman for the Oakland-based California Transplant Donor Network.

"In the hospital, I document everything. What I love about this is there is such respect expressed toward the patient," said Briggs, who got his forensic experience as an evidence technician for the Stockton Police Department, including photographing more than 300 autopsies over eight years. He teaches photography at law-enforcement conferences and has testified as an expert witness in photography.

Briggs is passionate about the work he's done for the donor network the past 20 years. What motivates him is the thought that, for every homicide victim whose organs are donated, seven people's lives are saved. Those seven people each have at least 10 family members and close friends who will be deeply affected by the organ transplant. That's 70 people.

"You can't walk away with a better feeling, knowing you've helped make it happen - - saving seven lives," Briggs said.



Richard Briggs of Manteca is the lead forensic photographer for the Oakland-based California Transplant Donor Network. He photographs organs that are removed and sent to the hospital to be transplanted

Photo Credit: DAVID FINCH/The Record

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His passion extends to his equipment. He uses only the best and attempts to keep up with the latest innovations in photography. His current camera is the top-of-the-line Nikon D2X, which retails for a nickel under \$5,000. He's not about to scrimp when lives are on the line, he said.

Since most of his work is performed during the middle of the night in a far-off hospital operating room with a surgeon in control, Briggs relies on his people skills to convince the doctor to cooperate. He's built up a solid trust and rapport with many organ-recovery surgeons in the region. But every once in a while Briggs has to convince a doctor unfamiliar with his duties that he only needs four seconds to view an organ in order to snap off 10 pictures.

And taking the photos is just the beginning. Briggs maintains the same respect for the very personal nature of the photos he has taken as he does for the victim and the victim's family.

In a typical month, he might get five calls from the donor network, or he might not get any. On one memorable night, he had three calls, which took him to Fresno, back up 99 to Modesto and south again to Madera. On that night, he hired a limousine and driver so he could work and sleep as needed and be able to give each assignment the attention it required.

"Because they have made the decision to become an organ donor, something good is coming out of something sad. The families get some solace out of something tragic," he said.

In addition to life-saving organs, Heneghan said up to 50 people can be helped with tissue donations -- corneas, skin for burn victims, heart valves, arteries, bone for bone grafts -- all from one donor.

In 1996, Briggs was recognized by the California Transplant Donor Network with its Humanitarian Award for his work with the organization.

While he's paid for his work, he often goes above and beyond what's required, such as attending and taking photos at an annual event that brings together more than 1,000 organ recipients and donor family members.

"Every year at Chabot College in Hayward, the donor families and recipients get together and honor their loved ones. It's an amazing event," Briggs said.

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As a forensic photographer for several decades, he admits he's seen it all.

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"We witness tremendous sadness, depravity, anger and grief, but those same emotions allow us to much better appreciate the beauty, joy and happiness in life, and in turn, make us far better people. In short, it's a great privilege to do the job we do," he said.

Contact reporter Joe Goldeen at 209 546-8278 or jgoldeen@recordnet.com

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For more info contact webmaster@recordnet.com