



Gift of Hope athletes prepare for 2026 Transplant Games of America

Members of Team Illinois to join more than 10,000 to raise awareness of the life-saving power of organ and tissue donation

ITASCA, IL, UNITED STATES, June 11, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Members of Team Illinois to join more than 10,000 to raise awareness of the life-saving power of organ and tissue donation

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Marion Shuck

[Gift of Hope Organ & Tissue Donor Network](#) is proud to announce its team of inspiring transplant recipients, donor families and advocates who will be included in Team Illinois at the 2026 Donate Life [Transplant Games of America](#), June 18-23 in Denver. This Olympic-style event celebrates the life-saving and healing power of organ and tissue donation.

Hosted every two years, the Transplant Games of America is the nation's largest celebration of life for those touched by organ, eye and tissue donation. The six-day Olympic-style event brings together thousands of participants from across the country, including transplant recipients, living donors, donor families, caregivers and medical professionals for competition, remembrance and advocacy.

“Every athlete and ambassador attending the Transplant Games carries a powerful message,” said Marion Shuck, Executive Vice President of Governmental Relations and External Affairs at Gift of Hope. “I see firsthand how these stories reflect both profound loss and incredible hope. They are living proof that donation saves and heals lives, and through their voices and their journeys they inspire others to give the same life-saving gift.”

The Need for Organ Donation

More than 109,000 individuals nationwide, including nearly 5,000 in Illinois, are waiting for a life-saving transplant. One donor can save up to eight lives and enhance many more through tissue donation.

Another person is added to the list every 8 minutes and unfortunately 13 others die each day waiting for a life-saving transplant. Gift of Hope encourages all to learn more about organ, eye

and tissue donation, register as a donor and share their decision with their families.

Stories of Second Chances and Lasting Legacies

The selected ambassadors each demonstrate how organ donation transforms lives and strengthens communities by bringing deeply personal stories of courage, loss, healing and gratitude.

Among the athletes is Elizabeth (Heaton) Sullivan of Tinley Park, Ill., a liver transplant recipient who endured years of chronic illness, multiple surgeries, and uncertainty before receiving a life-saving live transplant in July 2024.

Tammia McMillen of Lansing, Ill., a double-lung transplant recipient, hopes her participation in the Games raises awareness in underrepresented communities and encourages more people to register as donors.

For Brian Wilham of Williamsville, Ill., the Games provide a path forward through grief. After losing his son, who became an organ donor, Wilham now honors his legacy by sharing how his son's gift saved lives.

Similarly, Melissa Bornder of Creve Coeur, Ill. will participate in honor of her 17-year-old son Elijah, whose organs gave others a second chance at life.

Julie Goodrich of Joliet, Ill., a donor wife and daughter of a cornea recipient, hopes to share her family's full-circle experience with donation.

And Jim Branson of Philo, Ill., a grateful transplant recipient is committed to "living life to the fullest" in his "bonus life" while promoting donation through community outreach.

Inspiring Action Through Competition and Connection

Transplant Games of America participants compete in athletic events while honoring donors and raising awareness about the critical need for organ and tissue donation.

Each of Gift of Hope's ambassadors has committed to using their experience to educate others, share their journeys, and encourage donor registration.

"These stories show the profound ripple effect of organ donation from healing families to giving recipients the chance to thrive," said Shuck. "We are honored to support these ambassadors as they carry this mission forward."

About Gift of Hope

Gift of Hope Organ & Tissue Donor Network is the nonprofit organ procurement organization serving Illinois and northwest Indiana. As one of 55 OPOs nationwide, Gift of Hope partners with 180 hospitals and serves more than 12 million people. Since 1986, its work has saved more than 30,000 organ transplant recipients and improved hundreds of thousands more through tissue

donation. For more information, visit [giftofhope.org](https://www.giftofhope.org).

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