

Three of Pat Strobel's five grandchildren—11-year-old twins Nicholas and Samantha (left and right) and Tommaso, 8—sit on the porch swing where Pat used to "interview" the children with a video camera, asking them questions like "What's your name? What do you want to be when you grow up?"

IN THE WORLD OF TRANSPLANTATION, MOST SECOND CHANCES BEGIN WITH A LOSS

PHOTOGRAPHY | CHARLEE BRODSKY
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NEXT OF KIN

Right now, more than 92,000 people are on the national waiting list for a vital organ transplant. Their best chance for survival is probably a rare and tragic turn of events for another family. Last year, UPMC (including Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh) and VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System performed 686 transplants with organs from donors who appeared to be alive but were actually brain-dead. These people were still breathing with the help of a ventilator and yet already gone. Such cases amount to 2 percent of all deaths, and among them, only about half result in organ donation, despite the critical need.

Without a donor card or designation on a driver's license, it is up to the next of kin to make the sensitive decision about organ donation as they say goodbye to a loved one who appears to be merely sleeping. Three Pittsburgh-area families who gave the gift of organ donation in this way consented to share their stories with us here. They remind us of how some remarkable second chances began with a loss.

Like with the Strobel family. Back when Raymond, Bonnie, and Herb Jr. were growing up in West Homestead, Herb Sr. used to sell his blood to afford Christmas gifts. Mounds of gifts by the tree, their Uncle Casey filming the kids' faces—Christmas meant more to their mom, Pat Strobel, than anything.

Three years ago, Pat was hospitalized for congestive heart failure. "She wasn't on the phone crying," says Raymond. "She called just to say we had to postpone Christmas Eve because something came up." According to the family, Pat was treated with blood thinners, inadvertently opening a floodgate of bleeding in her brain. Cerebral hemorrhage runs in the family—it killed Pat's mother, grandmother, and uncle years ago. Then, seven months after Pat's death, her younger brother, Casey, followed. Both Pat and Casey became organ donors.

The Strobels are the kind of family who, with little notice, will assemble three generations around a table to tell you about Pat and Casey. They'll tell you about when Pat used to listen to the scanner to make sure her two police-officer sons were okay. "I don't like that dispatcher," she'd say. "She's not nice to you."

They'll tell you about the scores of Kaufmann's employees who showed up for Casey's funeral, remembering their coworker with story after story. "He would meet this one lady every morning at 5 a.m. just to open the door for her and carry her bags upstairs," Bonnie says. They'll tell you how upset Pat was when Herb Jr. got his first tattoo, and it didn't say "Mom." In January 2003, he inked three new letters into his arm.



Jim and Jan Eddy in the family's home in North Huntingdon. The couple light a candle for their son Mike every night.





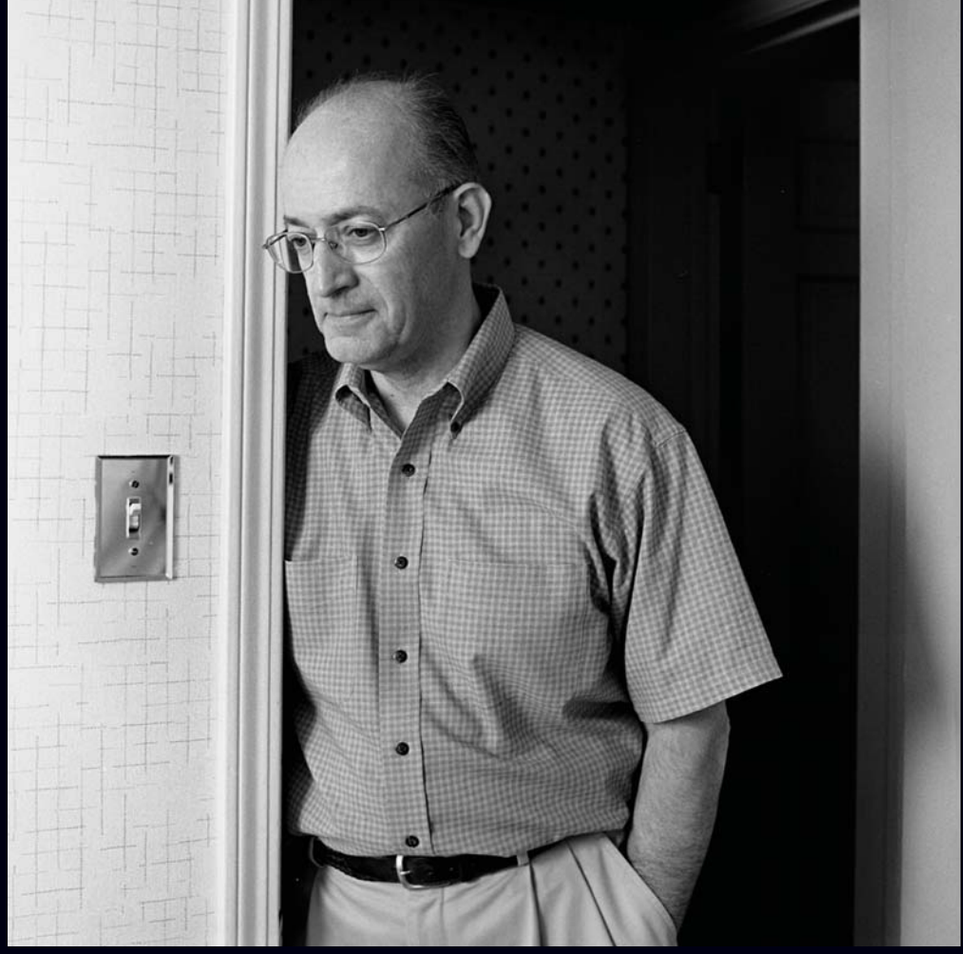
LEFT: After their son Mike died, the Eddys began collecting boy angels. This one was a Christmas gift from a woman who received one of Mike's kidneys. ABOVE: Jim Eddy holds the chain his son kept attached to his wallet.

Now as Jan and Jim Eddy reminisce in the living room of their North Huntingdon home, they laugh about the things that used to frustrate them. When Mike was little, he'd stash food around the house—eggs on the bed, fish sticks in the dryer. When he got older, it was his socks. Once, they found a pair in Jim's tackle box.

Mike's older brother, Adam, and younger sister, Angela, worked hard to keep their grades up. "Mike didn't care," says Jan. "He was there to socialize, play sports. He had 16 years of fun. He'd say, 'Mom, chicks dig me.'"

The accident happened 10 years ago this summer. Mike had been so good that week that Jim said he could stay out until 11:30. A friend was driving him home to make curfew when another car ran a stop sign, broadsiding them.

Months after the accident, Jan found a pair of socks in the living room couch. "I said, 'Now I get it.' This was not to drive me crazy while he was living. It was to make me laugh after he was gone. I sat down and just cried. I laughed and cried."





Frank Holby stands in the doorway, looking into his daughter Michelle's old bedroom, now empty, as he and his wife, Judy Holby, prepare to move. Judy holds a "Get Well Soon" balloon, still inflated 19 years after Michelle's friends left it at the family's door while Michelle was in the hospital.







LEFT: Michelle was about as tall as her doll when she received it as a gift at age 2. Judy created a painting of it a few years after Michelle died. **MIDDLE:** Frank holds an academic-achievement medal Michelle's teachers presented to the Holbys at the end of the school year and another medallion similar to those given to recipients of the Michelle Holby Memorial Scholarship, which friends and neighbors created in Michelle's honor. **RIGHT:** Judy still wears the necklace that Michelle gave her. Michelle had saved the money for it after starting her first job.

Frank and Judy Holby remember that September 10, 1987, was a muggy, overcast day because Michelle was up to her usual sighing and kidding around. "Dad, I really hope they don't make us run on the track. It's so humid. My hair's gonna fall."

To this day no one knows why Michelle collapsed that morning in gym. At first, they couldn't help wondering: *What if there had been a phone down by the track? The full-time nurse was at a training class—for, of all things, CPR—and what if she'd been there?*

But as time passed, they found that wondering wouldn't change what had happened: the loss of their oldest, a 17-year-old girl at the top of her class. A burial on the birthday of her idol, Bruce Springsteen. Letters arriving at their home in Pleasant Hills months after she'd died, congratulating her for her National Merit Scholarship.

They thought that donating her organs was what Michelle would have wanted—they hoped so, anyway. Then six weeks after Michelle died, they found a donor card in her purse. They'd signed it themselves more than a year beforehand, when Michelle came home from an assembly. They had forgotten all about it. ■