


Thank you!   
For The Gift Of Life

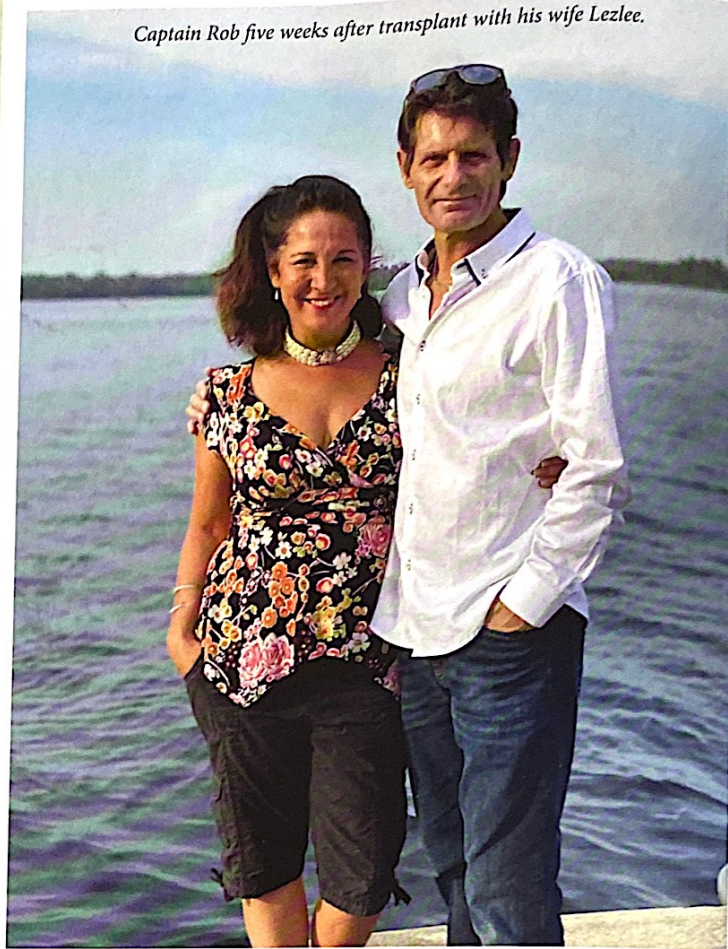
BY LEZLEE PETERZELL-BELLANICH  
Wife of organ recipient

*My God!*

Thank you to the person who checked YES on their driver's license agreeing to be an organ donor. Because of this, my husband and father of our two children, received his liver transplant at the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville, FL and, after a year being away returned on October 25th, 2020 to our home in Nyack, NY to a parade of local residents holding welcome home signs and lit fireworks. Our incredible life changing journey has turned us into grateful advocates of organ donation and transplantation.

My husband, Rob Bellanich, affectionately known as "Captain Rob," was born with an incurable progressive autoimmune bile duct disorder called Primary Sclerosing Cholangitis (PSC). While medication delayed the inevitable cirrhosis of the liver, nothing in his power could stop its progression. Captain Rob and I are owners of NY Boat Charter which owns and operates a 120' dinner yacht, Royal Princess, that we rent out for private parties in NY Harbor. It has been our family's source of income until Covid

Captain Rob five weeks after transplant with his wife Lezlee.

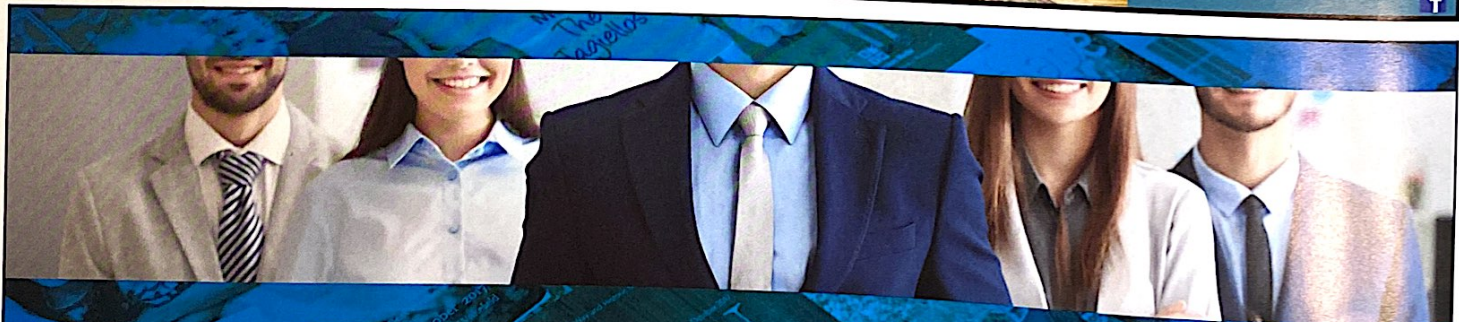



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closed it down. In 2018, Rob's disease led him to be placed on the liver transplant list in New York. However, we learned the hard way, that there is a shortage of donors in New York.

**In the rare event a person becomes legally brain dead in a hospital setting with no chance of recovery, they can donate their organs potentially saving eight lives, restoring sight to two people, and enhancing the lives of more than 50 others.** However, this won't happen automatically. Our country has an "opt-in" system whereby a person must sign up before donor. Our on their driver's license or national registry to become a possible donor.

Presently in the United States, there are approximately 115,000 people waiting for an organ transplant and about 20 people die each day waiting for an organ according to the transplant governing organization UNOS (United Network of Organ Sharing). There are simply not enough organs available. And so, we made a financially and emotionally risky move to try and save my husband's life. Last October 2019, we sold assets and used some of our savings for Rob to rent a furnished condo in St. Augustine, FL to be near the renowned Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville for a better chance at receiving a liver. I stayed in New York with the children until schools closed for Covid in March and then moved south so we could all live together in Florida while waiting for a donor, or just to have every last moment together.

Twice we got "The Call" and rushed to the hospital expecting the liver transplant. Rob was fully prepped for surgery, but sadly, the transplant was called off after the deceased donor liver did not meet the surgeon's qualifications. This "dry run" can happen to many people who are waiting.

Finally, after waiting two years in New York and another 11 months in Florida, we got another call from one of the Procurement Transplant Coordinators who asked us how quickly we could be at the hospital. "In 45 minutes," replied Rob who was already stuffing clothes in a bag. She instructed us to go directly to the Mayo Clinic ER. As we were driving in the rain, all I could think of was the donor. All we were allowed to know was that "something unexpected" had caused brain death and that the liver was in excellent condition.

In America, the reason most people become deceased donors is from a vehicle accident, stroke, tragic fall, or drug overdose. Deceased donors are declared legally brain dead by two independent doctors. Miraculously, our donor's blood type and body mass matched with Rob and Rob was able to get to the transplant center in time and his liver transplant took place on September 10th, 2020. We are eternally grateful to the donor for giving Rob the gift of life.

**Organ Transplantation has saved more than 700,000 people in the United States since the first kidney transplant in 1954. To sign up to be an Organ Donor, go to [www.donatelife.net](http://www.donatelife.net) or check the box and sign on the back of your driver's license.**

As a result of their experience, Lezlee is writing a book about their journey as well as others she has interviewed from the Mayo Clinic's Second Chance Support Group. Her book is currently titled "Second Chance Stories."

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