

A newsmaker you should know: Upsher works to dispel myths, fears about organ donation

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By Annie Siebert / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Lisa Strother Upsher always knew she wanted to work with people. Before taking a position with the Center for Organ Recovery and Education, she worked with a community outreach organization to reduce infant mortality rates.

"I've always done something with the multicultural community that affected health disparity," she said.

She now serves as CORE's minority organ and tissue transplant education program director, and she has a tough job: persuading wary people to become organ donors.

Mrs. Strother Upsher, 54, of Edgewood was recently named a Dignity & Respect Champion of Greater Pittsburgh by the Dignity & Respect Campaign, "an awareness initiative designed to join individuals, community leaders, community organizations, educational institutions, businesses and corporations under the common notion that everyone deserves dignity and respect," according to the campaign's website.

Mrs. Strother Upsher works in minority, multicultural and faith-based communities to educate people on the importance of becoming organ donors. She said the biggest myth she encounters is that a person will be allowed to die if emergency responders note that the individual is an organ donor. Others are concerned that it's somehow against their religion or worry they won't be able to have an open-casket funeral.

None of those things are true, she said, adding that most religions encourage organ donation because it's a charitable act.

"We want everyone to live, but after life is over, make that donation to give the gift of life to someone else," she said.

Some people don't oppose organ donation, they just don't know anything about it. "A lot of people said they never thought about it," she said.

Mrs. Strother Upsher visits community groups and religious organizations and gives residents and parishioners information about organ donation. She said fears and concerns about organ donation exists everywhere she goes.

"No matter where you're at, those fears exist in all cultures," she said.

She hands out brochures, gives presentations and has one-on-one conversations with people, but she said what often changes people's minds is hearing from recipients of donated organs and the families of organ donors.

Mrs. Strother Upsher is quick to note that people die every day waiting for an organ donation.

"I just think it is important to educate the community of how serious of a situation this is," she said. "People don't need to die because people have a fear of the unknown."

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