

CHECK THE BOX, ASK THE QUESTIONS

By Ryan Helfenbein

It never fails to amaze me when I see the amount of toys kids collect over the years and how much needs purging each Spring to make room for the new ones. We find tricycles, princess castles, Legos and more. Each year, my wife researches the charities that would benefit the most from our donation to ensure that the toys will go to homes with children that will enjoy them. I'm sure she is not alone in wanting to be sure that her donations will do the most good. We see acts of generosity across this great nation when people donate toys, cars and clothing to give them a second life. Individuals can even give of themselves with organ and body donation. However, unlike the research my wife does to find just the right organization to receive our family's unused items, how much can we truly learn about the process of body donation?

First, we must understand that body donation and organ donation are two very different things. Organ donation is offered by organizations approved by the state, as well as prominent universities. These organizations can take vitally needed organs from a dead person and use them for those who are living and in need, or for medical studies. One local example is the Johns Hopkins Brain Study Program at their Bayview campus. Organ donation is, in my opinion, something that is simply nothing short of amazing. According to the United Network for Organ Sharing, there are currently over 114,000 people waiting to receive organs. Unfortunately, about 20 of those on the list lose their battle every day. Families who choose to share a gift of this magnitude in their time of grief show us all the meaning of true generosity. To learn more about organ donation, one good resource is Living Legacy at www.thelf.org. And further, Maryland residents can check the box when applying for their driver's license, to specify that they would like to be an organ donor.

Body donation, on the other hand is completely different. It typically involves waiving all rights to the body upon death and donating it whole as a cadaver, whereas organ donation is intended for the sole purpose of benefitting those in need. What is difficult to research is what happens between the time a loved one leaves the care of their family and the time cremated remains are returned. Beyond learning that body donation supports medical education and research, investigation yields little in the way of answers.

Body donation usually implies that cremated remains can be returned to the family after its involvement with the research or educational process is complete, which can often take a considerable amount of time. However, one might rightly ask,

given the varied uses for donated bodies during the weeks and months of research and training, how can a family be certain that the cremated remains returned are those of their loved one? It is kind of like my son's Batman tricycle. After we donated it to the charity, we did not wait for it to be returned to us, we simply released it from our care and thought of it no more, leaving us with only the memories of him riding it. Some view body donation the same way.

Body donation arguably also does not provide the oversight or care that families receive from a more traditional experience. Some of the differences are merely inconvenient, such as a long wait for certified death certificates so that business matters can

be addressed. Body donation offers little assistance in securing certified death certificates or advice on how many to obtain. Other differences, however, are not only matters of convenience. Response to the place of death is something that your local

undertaker strives to provide as promptly as possible -- often within the hour, with sufficient staff to handle the transfer, no matter what obstacles are involved. Body donation programs operate with the staff on duty, so response times can be severely extended and available staff limited. This can become quite upsetting when the departed is at home. There have been reports of instances in which the family has been asked to assist with the transfer of remains to the transport vehicle because insufficient staff was provided.

Generosity and sharing are cornerstones on which our communities are built, and can be, for the recipient, life-altering or even life-saving. As with all things, proper research about exactly what to expect is essential in making these irreversible end-of-life decisions. Occasionally, someone will approach me with questions about body donation, but step-by-step detailed information is nearly impossible to obtain. Ask the hard questions and be sure you're satisfied with the answers.

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