

Fashion show features organ donors and recipients

BY EMILY FONTENOT

EFONTENOT@AMERICANPRESS.COM

Local salon owner Melinda Tilley said the idea of starting a nonprofit was far from her mind when she set out to plan a small fashion show fundraiser for Feb. 2.

But when hundreds of Facebook users and local sponsors showed interest, she realized it would take more than a business to put on a fundraiser that large, so she founded Fresh Start Organ Donation Awareness.

With the help of her staff at The Ritz salon, Tilley organized a fashion show for over 300 guests at the Cash & Carry building and raised \$15,000 for the Louisiana Organ Procurement Agency.

All the models were either recipients or donors and were able to share their stories with guests that night. Local sponsors and her staff provided the models with free makeovers and catering.

“I think it was good for them to be together in a positive environment outside of a hospital,” Tilley said.

She said she hopes the event helped future donors and recipients see organ and tissue donation in a positive, human light. As someone whose husband is alive today because of two donations, Tilley knows how life-changing one person’s decision to donate can be.

Her husband received a kidney transplant from his sister in 2006 and a pancreas transplant two years later. Tilley teared up when she recalled meeting the family whose deceased relative donated the pancreas.

Her story also inspired her relatives, when they lost their child, to donate

his organs and tissues.

“Because of those experiences, organ donors are close to my heart,” Tilley said.

She said she plans to make the fashion show a yearly tradition. Because of its success, she said, hair salons in other states now want to hold their own fashion shows for organ donation awareness.

Suzanna Morton, LOPA community educator, said she was shocked to learn that Tilley was able to raise that much money in a single night.

“To Raise \$15,000 for her first donation is incredible,” Morton said.

She said all the money will go back into LOPA’s community development program. The program’s goal is getting more people to register or let their families know whether they want to be a donor, she said, to increase the likelihood of donation.

Joey Boudreaux, chief clinical officer, said many times what stops people or their families from donating is not understanding the process.

He said they often don’t realize that a donor has to die from a brain injury and be put on a ventilator, and that only 3 percent of people do.

Many people also believe that emergency responders won’t be as likely to resuscitate an organ donor, a theory that couldn’t be true, he said, because not resuscitating would lead to heart failure and automatically disqualify the organs.

Boudreaux said the truth is less people would die — the count is 22 deaths a day in the U.S. — if more people decided to donate.

About 120,000 people in the U.S. need lifesaving organ transplants, 2,000 of whom live in Louisiana. The organization was able to use 178 donors to save 583 lives last year.

But Boudreaux said that if everyone who was eligible to donate in Louisiana would have donated, LOPA could have saved about 1,000 lives.

He said the organization's goal is recruiting 200 donors next year, and that, with the help of donations from people like Tilley, they expect to educate enough potential donors to reach it.