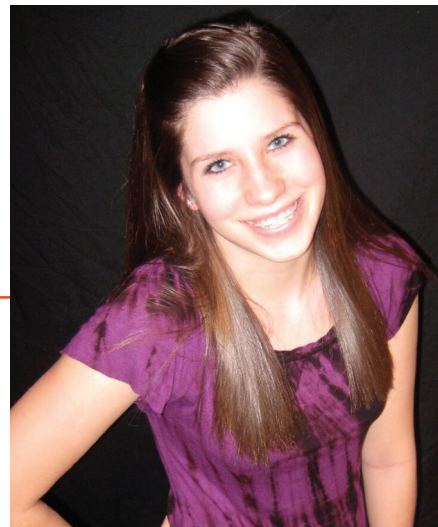


A Donor Family's Mission

Supporting Grieving Families



The start of a foundation to spread awareness about the importance of organ, eye, and tissue donation, as well as providing support to donor families as they navigate the intense grief of losing a loved one, began with a family tragedy. In 2010, Todd and Tara Storch were enjoying a Spring Break skiing trip to Beaver Creek, Colorado with their three children: Taylor (13), Ryan (11), and Peyton (9). Their lives changed forever with the last ski run on their first day on the slopes. Although Taylor was an accomplished athlete and wearing a helmet, she lost control and hit a tree. The weather prohibited a medevac flight to Denver, so Taylor was flown to Grand Junction, Colorado. Consequently, the family had to make the excruciating two-and-a-half-hour drive to be with Taylor at the hospital.

Thinking back to that day at the hospital, Tara admits to being in shock and recalls the confusion as they spoke with orthopedic surgeons and neurosurgeons. However, a moment Tara remembers clearly is when a nurse walked into Taylor's room and knelt beside her. With compassion, she said that Taylor was a beautiful candidate for organ donation and gently asked if the family would consider it.

"She made the most gentle and loving ask of us and Taylor. There was no pressure," said Tara. And knowing how giving Taylor was in life, the ultimate decision to donate her organs was an easy decision for Todd and Tara. They said yes, which sparked life for five individuals who were waiting on a heart, kidneys, pancreas, liver, and corneas.

Immediately following Taylor's passing, Todd and Tara decided that "we can either cave up in the grief or find the good. The good that came out of our loss was that Taylor saved lives. We found so much hope in that," said Todd.

Todd threw himself into the creation of Taylor's Gift Foundation with the initial mission to increase the number of organ, eye, and tissue donors in Texas. At that time

in 2010, only 2% of Texans were registered as donors - a fact that astounded Todd. Following his grandfather's adage, "it's not what happens to you that matters, it's how you react to it that does," Todd was motivated to make a difference not only in Texas, but across the nation.

But while he was energetic and passionate about being an advocate for organ donation, Tara's grief was almost too much for her to bear.





“We grieved so differently - it was beginning to hurt our marriage,” she says. She remembers exactly when this changed for her and Todd. They met a couple who had also experienced the death of their child and in response to some of Tara’s questions, the woman replied, “You must give each other the grace to grieve in the way that is best for each of you. There is no right or wrong way.” This simple advice was pivotal for the Storches. “I’m not sure why we weren’t giving each other room to grieve, but we weren’t. Her simple statement just put us back together,” said Tara.

In late 2010, Taylor’s story was featured on Good Morning America along with the Storches’ first meeting with Patricia, the recipient of Taylor’s heart. The moment that Tara and Todd listened to Taylor’s heartbeat within Patricia was so powerful it left the Good Morning America hosts silent and tearful for a long moment. With tears in her eyes, Robin Roberts said “this is a story we thought you all needed to hear.”

Following the national media exposure, the Storches were approached about writing a book, which was eventually published in 2013. The book, entitled *Taylor’s Gift*, with foreword by Max Lucado, talked of

faith, family, and finding purpose. It shares the raw and real journey of a donor family and the hope that can follow. In addition to being recognized as the Most Inspirational Book at the Books for a Better Life Awards in New York City, it was translated into another language due to its popularity.

Meanwhile, the work of Taylor’s Gift Foundation was growing nationally and making an impact. The Storches knew that organ, eye, and tissue donation wasn’t an easy topic, so they created the mantra “Outlive Yourself” to share the importance of donation. Through national media such as *Ellen*, *Today Show*, *People Magazine* and others, an “Outlive Yourself” movement was sparked. Nike even joined in by creating “Outlive Yourself” socks which are currently available on Taylor’s Gift’s website. “Many times when donation comes up in conversation, it makes people think of their death, but it is all about LIFE,” said Tara. “Organ, eye, and tissue donation is a beautiful way to outlive yourself.”

Throughout the years that followed, Todd and Tara kept noticing the large need for dedicated grief support specifically for donor families. Leaning on their own experience, they wanted to step in this space to pro-



vide this critical emotional support to donor families. In January of 2022, Taylor's Gift Foundation launched the Kindred Hearts Program to provide grief support at no cost to donor families. Through this program, a donor family is given a personal "Caring Guide" and access to support groups with trained facilitators who have experienced similar pain and trauma.

The Kindred Hearts Program, along with the need for this type of grief support specifically for donor families, caught the eye of prestigious NYU Langone Health. They are currently working closely with Taylor's Gift to do a pilot study and conduct research in this area.

"Organ donation and transplantation can be difficult to understand, especially for a family who is suffering a traumatic loss. Our team of researchers is working on national efforts with Taylor's Gift Foundation's Kindred Hearts Program to improve the care of donor families by offering dedicated emotional support, and to improve the culture of organ donation in America. We know the Kindred Hearts program can fill a community need that we have determined exists through our ongoing research," said Dr. Macey Levan, Associate Professor of Surgery and Population Health for NYU Grossman School of Medicine, and the Director of the Center for Surgical and Transplant Applied Research Qualitative Core at the NYU Langone Transplant Institute.

Tara explains that Taylor's Gift Foundation will always advocate increasing awareness of organ, eye, and tissue donation and encouraging more people to register to become donors, however, the core mission has now been solidified.

"We were able to hone in on something that is greatly needed and something our family knows about intimately," said Tara. "In the world we now live in, where mental health is so openly discussed and accepted, we are grateful for the opportunity to help families whose loved ones were able to give the gift of life to others. It is such an honor to be allowed to walk with them in such a dark time."

The Foundation has donor families coming to them for help through friends, family members and organ procurement organizations (OPOs). "Taylor's Gift is so thankful to its OPO partners for the instrumental role they play in the organ, eye, and tissue donation process and the beautiful job they do caring for donor families. We work collaboratively with our OPO partners, offering the Kindred Hearts program as an extension of their aftercare department to help donor families navigate their grieving process," Tara said.

"The Kindred Heart's Program has been a life raft of hope we can offer our donor families when they don't



know where to turn for individualized grief support. As the aftercare coordinator, this program provides care that I'm passionate about but am unable to provide to our donor families. Because of Taylor's Gift, we can offer a more comprehensive set of resources for these special families", said Amber Helman, Aftercare Coordinator with Living Legacy Foundation of Maryland.

"I think the impact of having donor families feel understood is such an important piece of moving forward in grief," Tara said. She describes the work they are doing now as "what the foundation was destined to do." Honored and humbled that they are able to give hope and comfort to donor families, many who are new to their loss along with many who are well beyond the first year of their loved one's death, Tara knows that Taylor would be proud of the work that is done in her name. "I know she is cheering us on," said Tara.

For more information about the Kindred Hearts Program and Taylor's Gift Foundation, visit www.taylors-gift.org. 