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Green Ribbons for Mike campaign boosts organ donor awareness in Dufferin County

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LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

Every April, Orangeville residents might notice a collection of green ribbons downtown. Not everyone might know what they mean. They are put up by the Green Ribbons for Mike initiative, a grassroots organ and tissue donation advocacy group.

Led by local resident Michelle White, the initiative was started by her late father Mike Steele, after whom the initiative was named, when he received a life-saving heart transplant.

?It first started pretty much from my dad,? she said. ?In 2009, he had a heart attack in January? By the time [it was] August of that year, he was on the transplant list, and in November of that year, he got his transplant.?

?He wanted to really appreciate the second chance at life. The number one thing he wanted to do was to raise awareness, because of the fact that if somebody hadn't registered as an organ donor, he wouldn't have been there to appreciate it,? White added.

In 2017, Mike began hanging large green ribbons in downtown Orangeville, hand-lettered with ?Be a donor? during April's donor awareness month. In 2018, with the town's permission, the project expanded to cover more of Broadway.

That June, Mike died due to kidney failure linked to medication and cancer that had spread. White continued his awareness work and, in 2019, launched the Green Ribbons for Mike Facebook page to better connect people and share information and stories about organ and tissue donation.

This year, the campaign includes green ribbons on 64 lamp posts from Wellington Street to Centre Street, along Broadway, as well as in the windows of 22 businesses and services.

Participants include the OPP, Dufferin County Paramedic Service, Headwaters Health Care Centre, and the constituency office of Sylvia Jones. Since 2021, the town has also held an annual flag raising and issued a proclamation recognizing April as Be a Donor Month.

?The town has always been so supportive of us,? White said. ?Every year, they're happy to hear from us again and are ready to set up a date to do this. Local businesses have been incredibly supportive too, just the number of businesses every year that pop up and ask for a ribbon. We have a couple that keep them up all the time.?

The campaign now operates alongside provincial efforts by Trillium Gift of Life Network, emphasizing the need for residents to formally register as organ and tissue donors and to inform their families. White cites Ontario statistics: as of this April, 1,697 people in the province are waiting for a transplant, including 32 children aged 0 to 17.

?This is important, we really need people to register because it's literally life and death,? White said. ?With tissue donation too? you're talking about bones, tendons, ligaments, eyes, heart valves, skin. That's up to 75 individuals that one person can impact. One person can enhance that many lives through tissue donation.?

Locally, Orangeville is 116th out of 170 communities in registration rates. The campaign highlights that prior practices, such as signing a driver's licence, are no longer sufficient; residents must register through official channels so hospitals can quickly confirm donor status for those who need transplants.

White also cuts through misinformation, identifying it as a factor for hesitancy.

?The biggest thing I hear from people is they say, ?you know, well, ?I'm too old, I'm too sick,' but I say to let the doctors decide that,? she said. ?The doctors will not treat you less because you're a donor, either. That's not gonna happen. They're not gonna let you die so they can have your organs. That's not gonna happen. I hear that a lot, too.?

White said that she continues to share statistics, personal stories, and resources via the Facebook page and hopes to collect more local accounts from donors, recipients, and families to support ongoing public education and increase registration rates in Orangeville.

Organ and tissue donations are lifesaving commitments, and the more people who are registered, the faster needed donations reach patients waiting.

For more information, go to facebook.com/greenribbons4mike.