

# *The* **Kittanning Paper**

## **Cornea Recipient Helps Residents See Potential Donation Benefits**

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*by Jonathan Weaver*

Just as Alexis Cathie was getting ready to enter college, she noticed a blur in her right eye.

“I noticed it when I was 18-19 and thought I needed a change in my prescription of my glasses, but I noticed after the change four or five months later, I couldn’t see again,” Cathie, 27, said. “It was pretty-much just a big blur in one eye.

“I remember doing the vision test, and they had a humongous ‘E’ on the wall and I couldn’t see it for the life of me. It wasn’t until they walked it to my face that I was able to see what it was,” the Pittsburgh resident added.

Cathie’s doctors diagnosed her with keratoconus – a progressive eye disorder that altered the shape of her cornea. Instead of round, Alexis’ were coned, making it hard for her brown eyes to focus on her schoolwork or at her job within Highmark.

The last option was a cornea transplant from the Center for Organ Recovery and Education (CORE) Eye Bank.

Headquartered in Pittsburgh’s RIDC Park, it took Cathie less than a year before she received her transplant in July 2011.

“Getting the transplant definitely helped a lot – I wasn’t really able to see, which made it difficult to perform my daily (tasks) since I’m on the computer a lot reading a lot of information. I’m also in school for business administration (at Grand Canyon University’s online program, beginning in April) so I’m reading a lot of documents – so not being able to see to the best of my ability was a hindrance,” Cathie said.

Cathie now shares her story with the community as part of a CORE task force to better educate regional residents about the advantages of becoming a potential donor.

CORE Associate Director of Community Outreach Misty Enos said that education was especially important in March during National Eye Donor Month.

“One of the biggest things we are planning to do is send out information to the community and healthcare workers about the importance of National Eye Donor Month. A lot of people don’t

have the background, information or education about organ donation period, so they don't know a lot about organ, tissue and cornea donation—so the first thing we like to do is educate them about that importance.

“What better than to give the gift of sight to somebody?,” Enos continued. “Last year, CORE was able to give the gift of sight to 346 Western Pennsylvania residents.”

Bridgeville Cornea Specialist Dr. Robert Arffa -Medical Director of the Eye Bank – said the amount of donations in the area often meet the patient demand.

“We don't have to match (corneas) – success rate is like 90 percent even without match. Usually, we can schedule the surgery and sometime's we'd have a cornea available for them on that date,” Arffa said.

Dr. Arffa said Cathie's disease is one of the two most- common to require a cornea transplant.

More than 40 percent of Armstrong County motorists and 45 percent of Pennsylvania drivers are organ donors.

However, Enos said there is a drawback to hearing if a cornea is available.

“The unfortunate part of this is that somebody has to pass away in order to donate their cornea – you can't just voluntarily donate a cornea,” Enos said.

Cathie hopes to be able to send a letter of appreciation to the family of her donor.

Engaged to be married this summer, Cathie is also an organ donor.

“When I was able to become an organ donor, I signed up for it – even before I was a recipient. I really didn't understand everything behind being an organ donor – I just thought it was the right thing to do,” Cathie said.

Even though most donations are from the area, donors don't have to live nearby after CORE established a partnership with the Central Florida Lions Eye and Tissue Bank last year.

After some stitches have been removed from Cathie's eye, she can only see clearly– both in her current activities and as an aspiring gospel singer and jewelry and fashion business owner .

“It's only going to get better from here,” Cathie concluded.

<http://www.kittanningpaper.com/2013/03/25/3-and-5-cornea-recipient-helps-residents-see-potential-donation-benefits/34980>