

Hampton heart recipient educates others

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By Rita Michel

With every beat of his heart, Ron Gooden of Hampton is grateful for the gift of life that allows him to count his blessings as he looks forward to future joys.

Since his heart transplant over a year ago, Mr. Gooden has returned to coaching high school football, attended the college graduations of his son and daughter and married his fiancée, Dee Dee Blosnich.

"It's a blessing," Mrs. Blosnich-Gooden said. "His optimism on life is just off the charts these days as is his amazing quality of life. He works out more than me."

Their wedding, scheduled for Nov. 26, 2011, was interrupted by Mr. Gooden's heart transplant at Allegheny General Hospital. As he recovered from the surgery and began physical therapy, the defensive line coach of football teams at Hampton and Quaker Valley high schools knew he wasn't going to just sit on the sidelines and watch life go by.

He was going to educate the public on how becoming an organ donor can affect an entire community.

"I want to make sure people are aware there are people waiting for a life-saving organ," Mr. Gooden said. "It's so important to get that word out and I'm so grateful to have the opportunity to do that."

He began working with CORE, the Center for Organ Recovery and Education, in RIDC Park in O'Hara. The nonprofit agency works with donors and their families as well as with hospital organ transplant teams, coordinating recovery of organs, tissue and eyes. Founded in 1977, CORE also facilitates the computerized matching of donated organs.

At about the time the coach and his fiancé were married on June 8, 2012, his face began appearing on billboards in the North and South Hills areas, promoting CORE. One can still be seen on Route 8 in northern Allegheny County.

Recently, he and Susan Stuart, president and chief executive officer of CORE, met with state Sen. Randy Vulakovich, R-Shaler, an advocate for organ donation who is co-sponsoring legislation to ease the donation-to-transplant process.

"It was a good feeling to meet someone who is here today because of the gift of an organ," said the senator, whose own father died from a heart attack at age 40. "My own father may have lived if such medical advances had been available back then."

Mr. Gooden's son, Derrick, said he is fortunate his own father received a new heart. His graduation from Slippery Rock University took place last May and his dad was there to enjoy it. "It meant the absolute world to me," Derrick said. "It was truly a miracle."

Daughter Amanda also was able to see her father in the audience when she graduated from Indiana University of Pennsylvania in December. However, it's her future that she and her father are working on now.

"A year and a half ago when he first went to the hospital, I had just gotten engaged," she said.

"He was so out of it he didn't remember me telling him. It was a scary time but luckily he got a heart and everything's been looking up."

Father and daughter even go to the same gym. "He's been really happy and a whole lot healthier," Amanda said.

Coach Gooden is walking/running three and a half miles a day and is ready to walk his daughter down the aisle on May 3. "It's a true blessing to be able to be here," he said.

Amanda said she is happy to share wedding plans with her dad.

"He's really involved and excited about it," she said, adding that her father now has one more concern facing him: "What's our song for the father-daughter dance?"

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