Fallen Anniston police officer honored with portrait on 2013 Rose Parade float

A young man with a big heart and a love of life — that’s how Jeniffer Morris remembers her son, Justin Sollohub. The stories Morris tells about her oldest son also portray him as a selfless police officer, loving son, devoted older brother and a loyal fraternity member whose uncommon willingness to help others made him special. Even in death, he managed to keep giving.

Sollohub, an Anniston, AL, police officer, was just 27 when he was shot in the line of duty while pursuing a suspect on Aug. 24, 2011. A little more than 24 hours later, Justin's family said goodbye to him — but not before, through their grief, they helped four other families get a second chance with their loved ones through organ donation.

Sollohub’s gift, his memory and his sacrifice were celebrated at the 2013 Rose Parade in Pasadena, CA, on Jan. 1. He was one of 72 organ donors remembered with a memorial floragraph — a portrait made from flowers — sponsored by the Alabama Organ Center and the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) Hospital on the Donate Life float, “Journeys of the Heart.”

“As a family we had talked about organ donation and all had the belief that donation would be our wish,” Morris said. “We all felt that if someone else could have a second chance at life, we wanted to give that to them. Justin would be proud to know we honored his wishes. I believe he knew we are proud of him for what he accomplished in life, as well as death.”

“The Alabama Organ Center, is honored to be a floragraph sponsor,” Executive Director Chris Meeks said. “For us, the Morrises represent the hundreds of donor families from Alabama who have graciously risen above their grief to help others. The float itself is a beautiful visual representation of donation and transplantation.”

The 2013 Donate Life Rose Parade float carried 32 riders and honored organ, eye and tissue donors. Each of the individuals portrayed in the 72 florographs left a positive impact on their families, communities and those they helped. The florographs lined a heart-shaped path rising above the riders aboard the float, which dramatizes the ups and downs experienced by donor families, transplant recipients and living donors.

“In participating in the parade, we are not only celebrating the life of Justin Sollohub with his family, we are celebrating the lives of all of those who have generously given the gift of life to others, both donors and their families,” said Devin E. Eckhoff, M.D., Director of the UAB Division of Transplantation and Medical Director of the AOC. “We hope our participation helps to raise awareness of organ donation so that the thousands of people waiting for a transplant can receive the gift of life.”

The float's florographs, including Sollohub’s, were partially decorated in Pasadena by volunteers. Sollohub's floragraph was then shipped to Alabama to be completed by his family and friends at two decorating events — one at Jacksonville State University’s Delta Chi fraternity house on Dec. 7, 2012, and another at UAB Hospital on Dec. 18 in the North Pavilion atrium. Sollohub attended Jacksonville State University, earning a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice. He was an active member of Delta Chi throughout his four years in school, and his fraternity has remembered him with the “Justin Sollohub Scholarship” at Jacksonville State.

“Delta Chi was special to Justin because they were his extended family from the time he joined them in 2002 until he died,” Morris said. “He had a bond with all of his fraternity brothers that many people could never understand. They were by his side through his college years and beyond. They will remain family forever and they are active in keeping his memory alive. We believe it only fitting to have the decorating event at the house he considered his second home.”

Morris, her husband Byron, and their son Blake, traveled to Pasadena to see Sollohub’s completed portrait adorn the float. They also participated in events surrounding the Rose Parade. “For Justin to be honored in a national forum shows us that many others realize what we have always known — that he was a great person and a joy to be around,” Morris said. “For people who did not know him, maybe they can learn just one thing from him — from tragedy and loss can come a new life and miracle for someone else.”
National Donor Sabbath was observed November 15th – 17th this year. Though observations by faith, it provided an opportunity to discuss sharing the greatest of gifts—the gift of LIFE.

If you’ve not yet friended or liked us on Facebook, why not do it today? Just search Alabama Organ Center and look for our logo.

Our friends and colleagues are sharing their personal stories, posting upcoming events that promote organ and tissue donation and expressing gratitude beyond words for receiving a second chance at life.

The Alabama Organ Center hosted its annual Service of Remembrance in loving memory of those who so generously gave organs and tissue so that the lives of others may be saved or improved.

The program included a story of thanksgiving from Jan Jones, kidney and pancreas recipient, 2011. Jan (pictured above) shared the story of her journey from a brittle diabetic with total kidney failure to post-transplant life finger-prick free.

Sandy Sides gave a moving tribute to her daughter, Savannah Faith Sides. At the age of 4 years, Savannah made the decision, along with her parents, to be an organ donor. Little did they know that a few months later, after an accident, her family would fulfill her wishes.

Donor families are invited to bring mementos and a written tribute about their loved one. The mementos are placed on a table at the front of the auditorium and the tributes are read aloud by members of the AOC staff. As the tributes are read, AOC staff members present the families with wind chimes, a gift to memorialize their loved one.

The Conference kicked off with a welcome reception by the pool. After a light meal, AOC staff and conference attendees enjoyed getting to know each other by participating in a group sing-a-long with Karaoke. The evening ended with a donor tribute/balloon release on the beach.

Tuesday’s Conference got underway with a presentation by Garry Taylor, CRT, CPTC, the AOC Manager of Organ Recovery, on the Creation of a Birmingham-based Recovery Center. Also speaking was Karen Hutto, AOC Procurement Transplant Coordinator, II who answered Frequently Asked Questions on Donation Facts. Toria Pettway, BA, LBSW and Kim Baldwin, MA, both AOC Family Support Services staff, presented a video on “Family Centered Care” and the hospital’s role in making referral calls.

Our guests enjoyed the welcome reception by the pool.
AOC AMBASSADORS

Many of you have asked about volunteer opportunities and other ways to help spread the word on organ, eye and tissue donation. We have organized an official volunteer program, the AOC Ambassadors. The Alabama Organ Center is enlisting a base of volunteers through its community outreach programs. These volunteers will regularly help educate the public about organ & tissue donation through participation in:

- Health fairs and public awareness events
- Special events
- Office assistance
- Presentations/school visits
- Workplace Partners referrals
- Religious groups
- Identifying other AOC Ambassadors
- Participating in community events
- Speaking at places of worship and civic organizations
- Encouraging local organizations and businesses to display donor registry brochures, donor cards and information

Are you a transplant recipient, donor family member, living donor, transplant candidate or a friend of the transplant community who would like to share your story? If so, the AOC Ambassador program is the perfect opportunity to tell others about the gift of life!

The program is designed as a grassroots initiative, which means we rely on you to identify opportunities to spread the word in your community. For more information on the AOC Ambassadors, contact Becky Davis at 1-800-252-3677 or 1-205-731-9200.

Please visit our website www.alabamaorgancenter.org and register to become an organ, eye and tissue donor.

NATIONAL DONATE LIFE BLUE AND GREEN DAY

National Donate Life Blue and Green Day is one of Donate Life America’s initiatives to register new organ, eye and tissue donors by drawing attention to this life-saving decision on both a local and a national stage. In Alabama, Karen Hutto, AOC Procurement Transplant Coordinator II, worked with the management of the Retirement System of Alabama (RSA) Tower and Governor’s staff at the state Capitol to light the buildings in support of organ donation awareness on April 18, 2013, National Donate Life Blue and Green Day. Thanks Karen – for this wonderful tribute. Join us on April 11, 2014, to celebrate National Donate Life Blue and Green Day 2014.
Would you like to help organ and tissue donation awareness? Make a donation to the AOC/UAB Education Fund. Mail your tax-deductible donation to the Alabama Organ Center, 500 22nd Street South, Suite 102, Birmingham, AL 35233.