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Donor Registry, corneal transplantation connect NJ residents

SPRINGFIELD – Although Jennifer Boehle and Mike Connallon never met, a meaningful connection exists between these two young New Jerseyans – a connection that arose from two unrelated tragedies.

Connallon, 24, of Hasbrouck Heights, was left blind in both eyes when he inexplicably developed a severe eye infection following routine eye surgery. The loss of vision at such a young age would most certainly curtail reading, working, driving, travel and simply enjoying time with loved ones – potentially for the rest of Mike's life. He feared he would never see again.

As devastating as Connallon's blindness was, an even greater tragedy was about to strike the Boehle family of Toms River. Seventeen-year-old Jennifer Boehle was a passenger in a car, driven by her boyfriend, that hit a school bus while traveling at high speed. Boehle sustained critical injuries and passed away a few days later.

For nearly two months, Connallon faced the harsh reality that he could be blind for the rest of his life. Exploring every possible alternative, his eye doctor referred him to an ophthalmic surgeon, Dr. Theodore Perl. Perl determined that his sight could possibly be restored through corneal transplantation. He recommended bilateral cornea transplants, and contacted the Lions Eye Bank of New Jersey to locate suitable donor tissue.

"We recover and evaluate donated corneal tissue for patients like Mike," explains Margaret Chaplin, Executive Director of the Lions Eye Bank of New Jersey. "We can only do that when someone has consented to donate eye tissue upon their death. That's why we rely heavily on the New Jersey Donor Registry. Adding your name to the list of registered donors confirms your wish to donate organs and tissues, including eye tissue."

Boehle was a registered organ, tissue and eye donor. As a result, the Eye Bank was able to recover her corneas for transplantation. One of those corneas was delivered to Dr. Perl in time for Mike's transplant surgery. "Jennifer's amazing gift saved Mike's eyesight," says Chaplin. "No one wants to think about the possibility of something happening to them, and no one should ever have to face a tragedy like Jennifer and her family did. But because Jennifer took a moment to register, she has changed Mike's life forever."

Donor families often feel that their loved ones live on through the gifts they've given. Likewise, transplant recipients feel a special bond with the families who helped to make their gift possible. This was certainly the case when Connallon had the unique opportunity to meet Jennifer Boehle's mom, Royce Boehle, at the Eye Bank's facility in Springfield. "It isn't always possible for recipients and donor families to meet," Chaplin explains, "so we were thrilled when we could help Royce and Mike connect with one another. It was a touching moment. And Jennifer's gift, combined with the amazing skill of an eye surgeon and the efforts of the Eye Bank, made this miracle possible."

"Jennifer will be able to see great things in this world through my eyes," Mike assured Royce during their visit to the Eye Bank.

New Jersey residents can register as organ, tissue and eye donors at any Motor Vehicle Commission (MVC) office. To learn more about the Registry or to obtain additional information on how to register, visit www.IJoined.org or call the Lions Eye Bank of New Jersey at (800) 653-9379.

The Lions Eye Bank of New Jersey is a subsidiary of Midwest Eye-Banks. It is a 501c(3), independent, not-for-profit organization dedicated to the restoration of sight. It recovers, evaluates, and distributes human eye tissue for transplantation. It also supports research into the causes and cures of blinding eye conditions, promotes donation awareness through public and professional education, and provides humanitarian aid to people in need of corneal transplantation throughout the world. Visit LEBNJ online at www.lionseyebanknj.org or call (800) 653-9379.

