

# The Story of Kelly and Rita

## Kelly's story,

*As shared by her mother, Andrea*



**Above, Kelly Muzzi with her mother Andrea. Right, The Muzzi family (left to right, Andrea, Dennis and Sean) holding a quilt that Rita made for them in honor of Kelly. Kelly's photo is on the mantle ledge.**

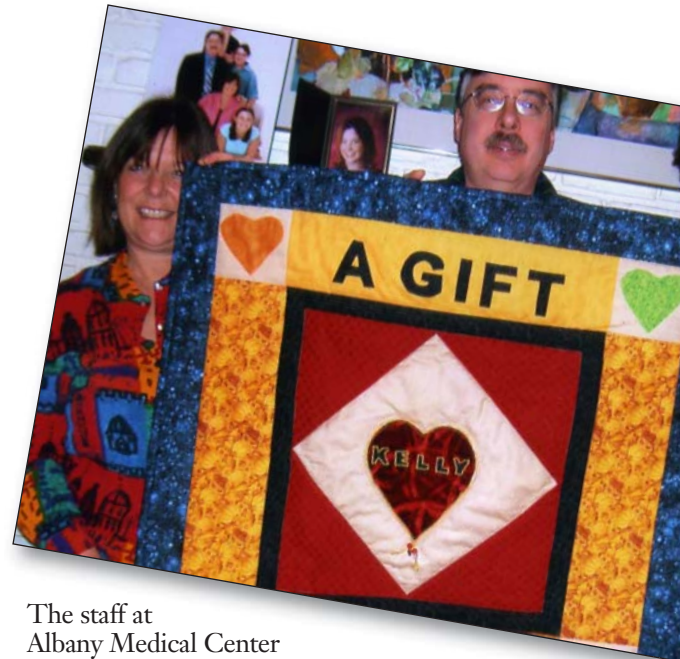
OUR oldest child, Kelly Muzzi, was a 20 year old junior at Bennington College in Vermont in 2005. Kelly was an artist and humanitarian. She had great plans for her life. When she was in high school, she had founded the Gay-Straight Alliance, in order to confront discrimination. Her dream was to eventually start a theatre company which specialized in performances about contemporary social issues in the world.

In January and February 2005, she had traveled to Kenya to work with children orphaned due to AIDS through SOTENI, International (she wrote an online journal: [www.travelpod.com/members/kellyinkenya](http://www.travelpod.com/members/kellyinkenya)). When Kelly returned, Feb. 16, 2005, she was only home one night; then we drove her back to the airport the next morning to return to Bennington College. When we hugged her goodbye before she returned to college, we had no idea that that was the last time we would ever hold our daughter.

Theatre was her greatest passion; within a week of her return, she had cast and started directing rehearsals for the play "Top Girls," by Carolyn Churchill. A few months later, the play was performed in her memory.

On March 29, 2005, Kelly and two other students started rehearsing a dance to perform in a class the next day. They were rehearsing in a third story dance studio at Bennington College. One student watched from outside. Part of the dance required Kelly and another student, Laura, to place their hands on a window, as a gesture to the rest of the class which would be watching the performance from outside. The window was a floor to ceiling, plate glass window, with no safety bar. The window shattered, and Kelly and Laura fell 20 feet to a brick patio. Both young women were rendered unconscious. Laura survived the tragic accident. Kelly was airlifted to Albany Medical Center and we received the horrifying phone call that is every parent's nightmare: "There has been an accident involving your daughter..."

We were in Florida on vacation, with son Sean and daughter Tina and her boyfriend. We spent the rest of the day scrambling to get to Albany Medical Center, where we arrived about 2am to find our daughter unconscious and on life support. The sense of horror and shock we felt cannot be adequately put into words. The first pronouncement of Kelly's (brain) death was on Dennis' 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, March 31. New York law requires two pronouncements of death, 6 hours apart, so it is a small blessing that the final pronouncement was on April 1.



The staff at Albany Medical Center (Surgical Intensive Care Unit) was very kind and sensitive to our situation, and we will always be so grateful for that. Kelly experienced brain death, which allowed us to make the decision to donate her organs. The doctors were very sensitive in talking about the subject. Organ donation felt like the "right thing to do." In our state of profound shock and sadness, the decision to donate her organs wasn't difficult because of the life that Kelly lived- service to others, particularly the disenfranchised.

Our (and Kelly's) decision was validated in two ways. After we returned home to Michigan, we found Kelly's driver's license. On the back, she had checked the "organ donor" designation. The second validation came a few months later, when one of Kelly's good friends at Bennington College, a premed student named Michelle, told us a story. In January, 2004, she and Kelly were hanging out, and Michelle was unsure whether or not to sign the organ donation card which accompanied her Massachusetts driver's license. Kelly presented her with reasons why it was important to do so, and convinced Michelle to sign the designation for organ donation on her license. Michelle is currently in medical school.

We eventually received information about the recipients of Kelly's "Gifts of Life". A woman received her heart, and one gentleman received her liver and a kidney. Another gentleman received her other kidney and pancreas. All three live in the state of New York, and are still in good health and are able to live full lives. Our reaction was a powerful mixture of grief and gratitude that our daughter saved the lives of three people because of her "Gifts of Life."

Hearing from Kelly's heart recipient gave us a sense of hope where none existed. We continued our correspondence. Around Christmas time, she made a beautiful quilt, wall hanging, with "Gift of Life" and a picture of a beautiful heart with Kelly's name on it on the front. On the back, she wrote:

"This quilt was made in honor of KELLY for her gift of life to me on April 1, 2005.

My prayers are for her family's healing as Kelly joins the group of angels who protect and watch over us.

~Hand and machine pieced and quilted by Rita, Dec. 12, 2005"

Rita is Kelly's heart recipient. April 1, 2005, also became her new birthday. She wrote that she knew she had the "heart of a champion." We send cards, call and email each other directly. Kelly's heart keeps beating strongly, and Rita maintains a positive attitude. Rita is a beautiful person with a beautiful soul. I cannot resist mentioning that she is a "Good-Hearted" woman! We have not met, but hope to do so one day. We continue to support and honor Rita and the two other recipients, as well as honoring our daughter, Kelly. Love never dies!

The first year after Kelly's death, we received one letter from the wife of another recipient. We continue to send the two other recipients a letter around the holiday times, and would love to hear from them. However, we understand that this may never happen. We do not give up hope. It would mean so much to hear from them, and we ask Kelly to watch over them as well as the rest of us. Losing a child means we have lost our future. Kelly's entire adult life was taken away from her. Loss of a child is not something one "gets over."

We have to recreate a meaningful life after our daughter's dreams were shattered. We have started the Kelly Muzzi Safety Fund along with Bennington College, and the Kelly Muzzi Memorial Scholarship, for theatre students, at Interlochen Arts Camp in Michigan. Tina and Sean have experienced the painful loss of their oldest sibling, an event which is often overlooked by society as a whole. The pain for them will (probably) last longer than ours because they potentially will live longer.

We will always be the parents of three children – two here with us, and one, in spirit. Whatever the outcome of our journey, Kelly connects us all, whether we are physically together or not. Along with Kelly, we carry the recipients of her "Gifts of Life" in our hearts as we continue our lives in honor and memory of our daughter and sister. In the places where our hearts are broken, the "light" shines through.

Kelly's memorial website is [www.dancing-angel.com](http://www.dancing-angel.com). We wish you many blessings to you in your lives,

Kelly's mom, Andrea Thorne,  
for (Dad) Dennis Muzzi, Tina, Sean,  
and our angel, Kelly

## A Journey of Healing Rita's Story

IN NOVEMBER 1998, I was diagnosed with cardiomyopathy. This was absolutely devastating because I never thought that I would have a heart condition. I was especially shocked because I was told that I would only have five years to live. However, with medication, my condition improved for approximately five years.

Unfortunately, my condition started to deteriorate in 2004. My cardiologist said that if I wanted to live, I would have to stop working and withdraw from all my outside activities. She referred me to another cardiologist who inserted a biventricular defibrillator to prevent sudden cardiac death. After about six months, it was determined that my condition was not improving and I needed to have a heart transplant. After going through an extensive evaluation process, I received a notice that I was accepted into the transplant program. They told me that it would take 3-6 months because I was not considered priority #1 (ranked on the waiting list) and because of my blood type.

Two weeks after receiving my notice about the transplant program, I went in for my regular appointment at the transplant center and was told that they were keeping me. They had a heart for me. This was April 1, 2005 - April Fool's Day, and I thought this was a joke. They said that this was no joke and that I would be receiving a new heart that day. I was in shock. I could not believe that they were planning to conduct surgery on me that evening. After having a crying spell, I called my family and that evening, I had a new heart. After my surgery, I was filled with mixed emotions - happy to receive this heart but saddened by the fact that someone lost his/her life in order for me to survive. I had to journal - writing my thoughts - each day to make sense of what I was experiencing and try to understand how my donor family felt in the loss of their loved one. I also prayed daily that my body and cells would work harmoniously together with my new heart in order to avoid any signs of rejection.

While I was still recuperating in the hospital, a social worker informed me that I could write a letter to the donor family, but that I could not contact them directly. All they could tell me was that I received a heart from a 20-year-old female who was

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## State-Wide Media Campaign Promotes Donation

**W**ITH THE COOPERATION and collaboration of the New York State Department of Health, Dream Catcher Communications, and the New York State Broadcasters Association, Inc., and funding provided by the New York State Budget, the New York Alliance for Donation launched a state-wide media campaign promoting donation in the fall of 2007. This campaign will continue in spring of 2008, encouraging New Yorkers to join the New York Donate Life Registry.

The ads featured a specific call to action to sign up for the New York Donate Life Registry. A New York State Donate Life logo was created, as was a new, easy to remember web address with a direct link to the New York Donate Life Registry: [www.donatelifeny.net](http://www.donatelifeny.net). The cable TV ads, entitled "Special People" ran in October and November of 2007 throughout New York State. In addition, both a 30 and 60 second radio spot were aired for three months in late 2007 and early 2008. The television and radio spots can be viewed online by visiting [www.alliancefordonation.org](http://www.alliancefordonation.org).



**CDT volunteers Jack Moses (left) and Debbie Hagerman (right) joined CDT staff member Mike Garlough (middle) to promote donation awareness at a recent hockey game of the Binghamton Senators.**

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involved in an accident. I knew that I needed to write the family to express my appreciation for their gift of life. I knew that it was a difficult decision and that they were saddened by the loss of their daughter. I was not sure if the family would reply, but I needed to follow my spirit and to convey my heartfelt sorrow regarding their loss.

After communicating with the family for almost a year, the opportunity of contacting the family

## 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual "Celebration of Life" Picnic

**T**HE CENTER for Donation & Transplant invites donor families and transplant recipients and their families to the third annual Celebration of Life picnic. The picnic will be held on the afternoon of Sunday, June 8, 2008 at the Columbia pavilion in Saratoga Spa State Park, Saratoga Springs, NY. The picnic is a casual, family-oriented event with food and entertainment. It offers an opportunity for the families of donors and recipients to get to know each other in an informal environment. More information will be forthcoming and save-the-date invitations will be sent soon.

## Donor Families Invited to Participate in Miracle Gift Book

**D**ONOR MOM and former CDT Mod Squad mother Wendy Vaniglia is creating a photo story book titled *Miracle Gift* that celebrates the lives of those that gave the gift of life through organ or tissue donation. Any donor family that would like to share their loved one's story and photos can send a submission to Wendy at [cmcwendyv@aol.com](mailto:cmcwendyv@aol.com). Up to 4 photos can be included in a submission. Families are welcome to write their stories as they wish. For those that would like to contribute but are unsure how to get started, Wendy offers the following questions to help families share their stories. How has organ donation affected your family? Tell me about your loved one. How would you like your loved one to be remembered? Have you met any of the recipients, and would you like to? Wendy would also be happy to interview a family and write a story for them. The book will be completed by April so please submit photos and stories to Wendy as soon as possible. People are welcome to visit Wendy's blog ([www.thegiftofcandi.blogspot.com/](http://www.thegiftofcandi.blogspot.com/)) for more information.