

BEN'S STORY: A JOURNEY OF SIGHT, LIFE, AND GRATITUDE

Every transplant is a miracle. These gifts change lives—they changed mine.



Ben - basketball coach

For Ben, life has been full of surprises—some tough, others miraculous. His journey as a triple transplant recipient is a testament to the power of eye, organ, and tissue donation and the generosity of others.

During his years as a high school teacher, cross-country coach, and basketball coach, Ben could tell he was slowing down during his runs. What he thought were knee problems slowing him down turned out to be a far more serious condition. Ben learned he had an enlarged heart, which was managed with medicine for nearly two decades. As time passed, Ben's heart was getting worse. During a checkup at the University of Kansas Hospital in 2010, doctors told him his heart wouldn't make it another six months without a transplant. Ben was sent to St. Luke's Mid-America Heart Institute, and just a few months later, Ben received a life-saving gift: a new heart from a young man named Matthew, who, Ben later learned, was studying to be a teacher. Matthew's life had been cut short in a tragic car accident, but his gift gave Ben a second chance at life. "It's impossible to put into words what that gift means," Ben says. Ben, his wife, and Matthew's mom have stayed close over the years, becoming good friends.

Almost a decade later, another health challenge surfaced. This time, it was his kidneys. After some tests, Ben's doctor told him his kidneys were damaged and they weren't going to last

much longer. After nearly three years on the transplant list, a new kidney became available, saving his life once again. Ben reached out and thanked the donor family, the same way he did when we received his heart but never received a response. Then, a few years ago, Ben sent them a bouquet of flowers on Thanksgiving, a small way of saying thank you, and they sent back a picture of his kidney donor, a young man named Mitchell. "I've written letters to the donor's family, hoping they know just how much their loved one's gift has meant to me," he shares.

In 2023, Ben's vision began to fade. It started gradually, with his eyesight slipping in ways he didn't quite notice at first. Driving at night became harder, and the world around him grew blurry. When his eye doctor referred him to a specialist, Ben learned he needed cataract surgery. That news alone was a lot to process but then came something he didn't expect: a partial cornea transplant. "It shook me," Ben admits. "I'd already been through two transplants, but I wasn't expecting to hear that word again—'transplant.' After the cornea transplant, Ben wrote to his donor's family, just like he had before, and received a heartfelt letter back. His donor's name was Becky, and her family's kindness left a lasting impression on him. "Every transplant is a miracle," Ben says. "These gifts change lives—they changed mine."

For Ben, these gifts aren't just about him. They've

given him precious time with his family: his four children and 11 grandchildren. "I think about all the moments I would've missed," he says. "I would've been gone easy if that hadn't happened. I could have been blind in one eye if that hadn't happened. None of it would've been possible without these donors. They didn't just save me—they gave me more time with my family."

After retiring from teaching 10 years ago, he joined the Gift of Life program in Kansas City, visiting high schools to share his story and teach students about the importance of eye, organ, and tissue donation. "I tell my story because people need to hear it," he explains. "Donation doesn't just affect the recipient. It's a ripple effect that touches entire families."

This year, Ben hopes to honor his three donors with three roses in the Rose Bowl Parade's Donate Life float—a way to celebrate the gifts that have shaped his life. For Ben, it was a meaningful way to celebrate their selflessness and the profound impact their gifts had on him. "It's not just about me," Ben says. "Their donations saved my life, gave me back my sight, and allowed me to be here with my family. Honoring them on such a big stage felt like the least I could do." Ben's journey reminds us of the extraordinary impact one person can have on another. Every day he wakes up, he carries the legacy of Matthew, Mitchell, and Becky with him. For Ben, life—and sight—is a gift he'll never take for granted.