It’s no mistake Rachel Brown has a successful career in funeral services, but more than two decades later, she would tell you it wasn’t part of her original plans. Nonetheless, it’s been a rewarding path in her life.

“I’ve been very fortunate to work for this family owned and operated funeral establishment for 26 years,” Brown says, adding she considers the work she does a gift.

As Hansen Mortuaries funeral home director and embalmer, every day she comforts families through difficult moments, with dignity for the deceased a top priority. She balances that with the value of donation and the importance of funeral homes working with organ and tissue recovery teams. She had a personal connection to donation as well. She is a tissue recipient.

Brown was an athlete at Arizona State University, and she was part of the Women’s USA National Softball Team. She even won a gold medal in the 1993 World Games in Holland. But two herniated disks in her neck kept her from playing her favorite sports, which include golf.

“In 2004, I had to have a spinal fusion to regain the strength and feeling in my hand and arm,” says Brown. “I am forever grateful for the donor tissue that allowed me to be pain free to continue to do the things I love.”

Other than softball and golf, the things she loves include camping, skiing, kayaking and spending time with her wife, Christina Underhill, and their dog—which would be difficult with spinal issues and restricted mobility.

Bone, cardiovascular, connective and skin tissues improve lives in many ways, offering healing through transplantation, such as by restoring a patient’s mobility, treating severe burns, or replacing damaged heart valves. Cornea donation can restore vision for a patient who may no longer be able to drive or see the sunset.

On average, about 1,000 Arizonans heal lives through the amazing gift of tissue donation each year. In 2018 specifically, there were more than 1,400 tissue donors.

“As the need for lifesaving and enhancing tissues have changed and increased over the years, I have made it my mission to understand what tissues are being used for and how I can restore donation sites,” she says, adding it’s important to her to give grieving families the opportunity to see their loved ones a final time, if that’s part of the funeral plans.
Keratoplasty (DMEK) corneal surgical technique, which allows DNA’s eye bank to perform corneal segmenting—which is the splitting of one cornea into two grafts for transplantation. The anterior segment of the cornea is removed after DMEK tissue processing. It undergoes additional processing for long-term preservation. The corneal tissue process is limited to donors from 55 to 75 years old.

**How it works:**
Using a surgical microscope to separate the tissue layers, the DMEK graft is removed from the cornea and the remaining anterior layer is rinsed and stored. The result are two segments—the DMEK graft and the anterior graft.

“DNA transplanted more than 120 DMEK grafts in 2018. Five of those DMEK grafts were segmented or split, which resulted in two transplantations from one cornea,” says Sharlene Rupp, eye bank supervisor. “As the result of the generosity of others, more than 900 people received the gift of sight.”

DNA sends DMEK grafts to ocular surgeons for immediate surgeries. The anterior layer is sent to another EBAA accredited eye bank for long-term preservation. These corneas in long-term preservation solution can be used for tectonic surgical procedures or glaucoma shunt coverage up to five years later.
Collaboration between funeral homes and organ procurement organizations is essential in saving and healing lives through organ, cornea and tissue donation because after recovery comes restoration. Arizona’s funeral homes work to make donation more successful each year.

Donor Network of Arizona (DNA) recognized Desert Lawn Funeral Home and Samaritan Funeral Home as Outstanding Funeral Home Partners for their role in saving and healing lives at DNA’s Donation Champions Awards Breakfast on Nov. 13, 2018.

DNA recognized both John Hassett and his family of Desert Lawn Funeral Home for supporting donation in any way possible and for their crucial role in transporting donors quickly, effectively and with dignity. Any hour of the day, they are willing to do whatever is needed for a recovery to take place.

DNA also recognized Samaritan Funeral Home Owner Bryan Wilson, Director Eddie Lopez and Embalmer David Zachman for their efforts to increase donation and for always asking the question, “What more can we do to support donation?” Samaritan Funeral Home includes DNA in the community events it holds and makes an effort to understand the donation process.

David Crawford and his team were also recognized as an extraordinary transport company. In addition to being timely and responsive, they are friendly and go above and beyond expectations to ensure our donors are transported with great care.

The Donation Champions Awards Breakfast at the Arizona Biltmore celebrated the organizations that come together to make donation possible in Arizona. DNA recognized more than 100 hospital, health care, media and community partners for their dedicated efforts to help make the most of life through the gift of donation.
U.S. Army veteran Michael “Mickey” Russell believed his purpose in life was to help—in life and death. He served his country, as well as his community, with the gift of life after he passed.

In the summer of 2017, Mickey had just completed the hiring process with the Scottsdale Police Department, but he passed away suddenly after a blood clot. A year prior, he had written a letter to explain his decision to donate, “so that I can continue to serve even in death.”

Stephanie Russell, Mickey’s mother, said no one saw his death coming, but she knew her son wanted to continue giving back.

“He just said he always wanted to serve after his death,” says Stephanie, explaining the pride she has for her son who cared so much for others.

Stephanie says the healing process of losing her son continues, and that giving back is an opportunity to celebrate Mickey’s commitment and service to his country.

“My son was my heart. Me and my son did everything together,” says Stephanie. “For me to still be honoring him even after a year is surreal.”

His generosity restored vision for two people. He also donated tissue that will heal the lives of dozens more.

Donate Life Arizona sponsors NASCAR Xfinity driver, Joey Gase, who raced with Mickey’s picture on the bumper of his racecar to honor him at ISM Raceway Veteran’s Day 2018. Stephanie got to sign the hood of the car at a dedication ceremony at Catholic Charities MANA House in Phoenix ahead of the race, drawing a heart around her message.

“When they see that picture, they’re going to say, ‘Why is that on there?’ And they’re going to look into [organ and tissue donation],” says Gase, adding his mother who passed away and became an organ and tissue donor inspires him. “I know we made the right choice.”
Doug goes above and beyond to help DNA staff harness all gift of life potential, and Doug is there to help in any way possible. As much as we diligently work to make the transition smooth for families and all groups involved in donation, certain challenges arise.

Recently, we had difficulty with logistics in a specific donor case, and Doug kept DNA updated in real time throughout. He also worked with the family to make sure they were cared for to the best of his ability. Because Doug prioritized communication with DNA during this case, he allowed everyone involved to respect the family’s time frame for funeral arrangements.

Despite the challenges, Doug refused to let the family take on any aspect of the burden. Doug is a valuable supporter of DNA as we continuously work to improve processes, follow regulations, and collaborate to support families and funeral homes throughout Arizona.

Thank you, Doug, for your support and commitment to the families you serve!

– Tiffany Welton
Partner Relations Coordinator

For this quarter’s newsletter, I want to spotlight Doug Dobson and the team at Tempe Mortuary. From the moment I met Doug, he had an interest in working together, both sharing ideas and getting feedback about how we can work together more effectively with a priority of supporting the families in as they make final preparations for their deceased love one.

Doug Dobson
Tempe Mortuary

1,417 Arizona tissue donors gave the gift of healing.

Sight was restored for 913 people.

779 lives were saved through organ donation.
DonateLifeAZ Registry

3,555,090

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