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JOE MAHONEY/ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

As Julius Britto looks on Wednesday, John-Michael Keyes hugs Britto's daughter, Danielle, at an organ donor event at Presbyterian/St. Luke's Medical Center in Denver. Britto received a cornea from Keyes' daughter, Emily, who was killed by a gunman in September.

'You're part of our family'

Platte Canyon High shooting victim bequeaths gift of sight to retired cop

By James B. Meadow
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

I took the alchemy of medical science and simple human kindness to enable the 63-year-old retired black cop from New York City to see life through the eyes of the 16-year-old blue-eyed blonde high school student from Colorado.

Which is why it was on Wednesday — Valentine's Day — that Julius Britto stood in an unfamiliar room in an unfamiliar city, smiled and then fastened a look of love on three people who only hours before had been strangers.

And John-Michael Keyes, Ellen Stoddard-Keyes and Casey Keyes — swirled in a kaleidoscope of emotions — smiled back.

For it was their Emily whose cornea was now affixed in Britto's eye, a precious gift of sight that the girl who was slain Sept. 27 at Platte Canyon High School in Bailey had bestowed upon a man she never met.

'So much goodness'

"It's bittersweet, that's all I can say," said John-Michael Keyes, a look of pain and wonder washing over his face during the Donor Awareness Council's "Show Us Your Heart" consciousness-raising event at Presbyterian/St. Luke's Medical Center.

"But it's just spectacular that so much goodness can happen when you give the

kind of gift that Emily did."

It was Emily who had researched the possibility of being an organ donor and then discussed it with her family. So it was with their parents' blessing that the shiny new driver's licenses she and her twin brother obtained in May both bore the small heart emblem, proof of their desire to be organ donors; to help others the way a cousin of theirs had been helped with four separate heart-valve transplants.

"Emily was practical about being an organ donor, she knew all the implications. Of course, none of us ever expected it would happen so early," said Stoddard-Keyes in a soft voice. That voice quavered just a bit and the mother's eyes glistened with gathering tears a few seconds later.

Remarking how Emily's cornea now belonged to Britto, she said, "This is all we're ever going to see of my daughter again. I told Julius, 'You're part of our family.'" Then with a smile, she added, "Like it or not."

Through the I Love U Guys Foundations, which Keyes has established in Emily's memory, they have made it clear that one of the initiatives they will pursue is to further public awareness about organ donation.

In the nearly nine years that the partnering organizations of the Donor Awareness Council have been trying to raise public consciousness, the percentage of Coloradans whose driver's licenses bear the small red donor heart has risen from 33 percent to 60 percent.

Although the surge is encouraging, the DAC is hoping to raise the percentage past 75 in the next few years because the need for organ donations has inexorably increased.

"There are 1,701 Coloradans on the waiting list for organs," noted Jennifer Moe of Donor Alliance Inc.

Commenting on what she called "this unmet need," DAC Executive Director Charlene Hill explained that "one donor could save the lives of up to eight people. One tissue donor could enhance the lives of up to 100 people."

'A powerful gift'

Following up on this, Moe said that in 2006, there were 115 organ donors in Colorado — donating 343 organs — and an additional 197 tissue donors.

Among the grateful recipients was Britto, who today lives in North Carolina. But now, there is something that ties him to Colorado in a far more powerful way than a mere address.

The retired cop had been suffering diminishing vision since 1992 due to Fuchs' Dystrophy, a progressive disorder of the cornea. He had to stop driving his car, and performing even simple tasks like pouring a cup of coffee became huge obstacles.

"Basically, I couldn't really function," he recalled.

On Oct. 3, 2006 — less than a week after Emily had died — Britto received her right cornea.

"It's a powerful gift. Just awesome," said the soft-spoken man, who explained that, like Emily, he is a fraternal twin.

Today, Britto has something else in

common with the petite girl he never knew.

"I feel God has blessed me with vision for a second time for a reason. Now I want to help people, too," he said, explaining that after receiving that cornea he decided to register as an organ donor himself. And, to prove it, he pulled out his North Carolina driver's license and proudly brandished it.

Emily Keyes' legacy will not end with the cop from New York, either. It is estimated that another 25 people will benefit from some use of her tissues.

Asked how he felt about his daughter's unflinching gift, John-Michael Keyes took a deep breath, then slowly shook his head.

"I have no words now."

Other paths unwind

Beyond Emily Keyes' gift of her body, other paths are starting to unwind, paths upon which others hope to walk and honor her.

Kenny Sause, a fellow student at Platte Canyon High School, told the crowd that he had started a Students for Organ Donations chapter at the school to help "promote kindness in this world."

All around him, adults smiled and applauded.

But perhaps no one smiled broader or clapped louder than the 63-year-old black man who, thanks to a waf-like blonde teenager, had been given the gift of sight and with that, perhaps a magical new way of looking at the world.

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Emily Keyes researched the possibility of being a donor.