



From a Family Tragedy, Comes a Surprise Gift

The Persingers lost a son and brother in December 2007, but years later, his donated tissue found its way back to his family.

Shelley and Todd Persinger just wanted to honor their son’s wishes.

It was December 2007 when the Wisconsin couple suddenly found themselves living a nightmare. Their oldest child, 17-year-old Chris – a free spirit who loved sports, his guitar, and big city adventures – had just died in a car crash. Chris had signed up to be an organ donor, but due to the extent of his injuries, his organs could not be donated.



Still, his parents had another option.

“We received a call from the American Tissue Services Foundation,” Shelley said. “Chris was a registered donor, but he was only 17 and needed parent permission to donate his tissue. So, we honored his wishes.”

With the help of the foundation, which is accredited by the American Association of Tissue Banks (AATB), people like Chris are making a difference every day. Tissue donations, such as skin and bone, can improve or even save a recipient’s life. The nonprofit Donate Life America estimates that each year in the U.S., 30,000 people donate tissue that is used in 1.5 million tissue transplants.

Like many people, the Persingers weren’t registered donors when Chris died. “I didn’t know the donation process,” Shelley said. “It was on the driver’s license form, but I had no information about it. I remember renewing my license and thinking to myself, ‘I don’t need to think about this now, I have a long life to live.’” Now Todd, Shelley, and sisters Courtney and Caitlyn are not only registered, but they work to encourage others to do the same.

That might have been the end of Chris’ story, except that 3 1/2 years later, his own family would receive his final gift.

After Chris’ death, his sister Courtney – now the oldest child – embraced her brother’s adventurous soul, eventually moving out West to work as an analytics consultant. Caitlyn, on the other hand, threw herself into sports – where she felt closest to Chris. They had shared a passion for soccer, and Chris always pushed Caitlyn to the limit, trying to make her better. “He was her biggest fan and her biggest critic,” Shelley said. Caitlyn became an outstanding high school athlete and hoped to play soccer in college.

Then it happened.

Caitlyn tore her meniscus and ACL playing soccer, right before her senior year. The recovery period for this type of injury is lengthy – usually about six months or longer. “My injury hit me harder than I thought it would,” Caitlyn said. “I didn’t have this outlet that I could turn to anymore.” Caitlyn was desperate to get back out on the playing field – for herself, her college career, and her brother.

During a visit to the surgeon’s office, the Persinger family was told that there were two options to reconstruct an ACL – using an autograft, which is a patient’s own tissue, or an allograft, which is donor tissue. “It was 3 1/2 years later, and we started to think about Chris and wondered if he’d helped anyone,” Shelley said. She emailed the American Tissue Services Foundation (ATSF) and learned that Chris had helped 63 people. The Persingers were comforted by the news.

Then on the day before Caitlyn’s surgery, they received a call from ATSF. There was one allograft left from Chris’ donation that had not yet been transplanted, and it happened to be a section of his tibialis posterior, which was the exact tissue that Caitlyn needed. Caitlyn’s physician placed a request for overnight shipment. The next morning, Chris’s donated tissue was transplanted into his sister’s knee.

Caitlyn recovered quickly, returning to the soccer field in her senior year and then going on to play in college. “Having his tissue in my knee is a constant reminder that he is with me,” Caitlyn said. And she hopes her family’s story serves as a reminder that the tissue bank community can change lives, often at critical moments.

“Chris continues to live on in the 64 recipients he helped, including Caitlyn,” Shelley said. “His impact really made a difference. We miss him every day.”

The AATB thanks the Persingers for coming forward with their personal story to educate people on donation. The family has also spread the word at motor vehicle divisions, coroners’ offices, and annual events like the AATB conference and the Donate Life Rose Parade.

“We’re not necessarily a limelight family, but our story puts us in the limelight,” Shelley said. “And that’s OK. It’s kind of a tribute to Chris and who he was. Our passion is only to make a difference. And if we can, that’s important to us.”

How AATB learned about this story: Like many donation organization websites, the AATB has a contact link for those who would like to share their story of being a tissue recipient ([Join the AATB Speaker’s Bureau](#)). The Persingers’ story was submitted through this link. The Persingers’ story had been previously featured in the local media ([Milwaukee Journal Sentinel: A brother’s tissue helps in an unexpected way](#)) and as part of the promotion of the Donate Life Float in the Rose Parade. Chris Persinger’s tissue was recovered by American Tissue Services Foundation and processed by Medtronic—both AATB-accredited organizations.