

Lawmaker's goal after son's near-death experience: Increase organ donations



Credit: Contributed

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Georgia state Sen. John Albers, R-Roswell, at home with his son, Will, shortly after the surgery in July 2021 when dad gave his son his left kidney. (Courtesy photo)

When he vomited blood, he went to see a doctor. That led to a hospital referral. Within hours, a doctor entered his room with a chaplain and a grim prognosis.

“All your organs are shutting down. We do not think you will make it through the night,” they told him.

Will Albers survived, but he was diagnosed with renal failure.

This can lead to a lifetime of dialysis, a frequent and time-consuming treatment. He needed a kidney donor.

Within a year, he found one: his dad.

“God gave us two kidneys. We only need one,” said the father, John Albers.

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The son was lucky his dad was a medical match.

The wait for a donor can take years, with demand far exceeding supply. Fewer than half of Georgians have registered to be a donor, said Kyla Harris of the [Georgia division of the LifeLink Foundation](#),

which promotes and facilitates organ donation.

In Georgia, 2,874 people were awaiting an organ transplant as of Wednesday, according to the [Organ Procurement & Transplantation Network](#) — 2,543 of them for a kidney. Nationally, there were 104,000 awaiting an organ, more than 89,000 of them for a kidney.

John Albers, a Republican state senator from Roswell, has committed the rest of his life to encouraging more organ donation.

During the first legislative session after the transplant, the senator got language into law that prohibits life insurers from penalizing people who donate bone marrow or all or part of a liver, pancreas, kidney, intestine or lung. It also more than doubled the tax deduction for organ donation — to offset unreimbursed travel and lodging expenses plus any lost wages — to \$25,000.

John Albers, who started a foundation called [Second Alarm](#), wants people who didn't register for organ donation when they got a driver's license to go through the process again so they can check the donor box. He is going to raise money to help defray the cost.

Next on his agenda, more government financial help for donors.



Credit: Natrice Miller/AJC

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Sen. John Albers, R-Roswell, talks to the Senate Judiciary Committee about Senate Bill 392, which would have made it a crime to use deepfakes in campaign ads, at the Georgia State Capitol on Monday, Jan. 29, 2024. (Natrice Miller/Natrice.miller@ajc.com)

Also, starting in August, Georgia teenagers will have to learn about organ donation in their health classes. Albers lobbied the Georgia Board of Education to require it, and the resulting standards for eighth grade through high school mandate instruction about the statewide donor registry as well as the “facts and myths related to organ and tissue donation.”

Will Albers, now 28, is familiar with some of the “false fears,” as he called them, about organ donation.

“What if I could be put on life support and saved? ... Are they just waiting for me to die so they can take the organ?”

No, he said. That would contradict [an oath many doctors take](#) to do no harm to their patients.

“And then the second thing is — and honestly, this makes complete sense to me: Well, when they harvest my organs, am I going to look weird ... you know, at my funeral?”

His rejoinder: “If you’re dead, who cares?”

The young Albers thinks the term organ “donation” itself is weird. He prefers a different word: gift.

“Because it genuinely is the gift of life.”

How to become an organ donor

Georgians can register for the state’s donor list in a variety of ways. They can tick the organ donor box when they get a license for driving, hunting or fishing. Or they can sign up online at [Donate Life Georgia](#).