

Organ donors give best gift of all

Recipients share remarkable stories of hope and love as they get a new lease in life, with reporter, Virginia Winder

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Before Kat Turner got a double lung transplant in April last year, she was confined to a wheelchair and attached to an oxygen machine.

On November 11 and 12, the coastal woman with cystic fibrosis will join the Beaters and Breathers team for the Taranaki Steelformers Round the Mountain Relay.

"My whole life has changed," she says.

"Before it was even a struggle to go to the bathroom and now I'm going to be walking 8 kilometres around the mountain."

The 26-year-old explains why she's doing it: "Because I can."

After a life-time suffering from the genetic disease that gums up lungs and digestive systems with a thick, sticky, mucus, Kat no longer needs to cough, has worn a bikini for the first time in her life and can now to every-day tasks without thinking.

Quite literally, her lungs no longer have cystic fibrosis, but she is still immune suppressed and needs to take care to avoid upper respiratory tract infections.

Before the transplant, her husband Lucas quit his job for two years to look after her.

"Now we are a partnership again."

The Opunake woman is also starting to think about what she wants to do with her life – all thanks to a new pair of lungs.

The person who donated those lungs to Kat saved her life. Sadly, they had to lose to their own life to do so.

"I think it's a very, very important thing to be a donor if you can," she says.

"It's quite a surreal thing to know somebody else has done that for you. It's such an amazing thing."

Another transplant recipient is New Plymouth man Ross Southee, who got a new heart in 2005.

He won't be in the team this year, but he'll still have a presence via the reflector vests and T-shirts he's donated to the team.

His heart was irreparably damaged from having rheumatic fever three times as a child.

An aorta valve transplant in 1989 gave him another great 10 years of life, but then his health



New life: Supporting the Beaters and Breathers in the Taranaki Steelformers Round the Mountain Relay are, from left, Ross Southee, Julie Fowler and Kat Turner.
Photo: VIRGINIA WINDER / FAIRFAX NZ

started failing.

He was on the transplant list for three years before getting a phone call one Saturday morning while at work. An aircraft was flown to New Plymouth to pick him up and within five hours he was on the operating table in Auckland.

After his heart transplant, the first thing Ross noticed was how warm his feet and hands were.

"My extremities were so cold before that. It made you feel alive."

Although Ross had always worked fulltime leading up to getting his new heart, he had never been able to play sport with his son.

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Beaters and Breathers team organiser Julie Fowler lost her son Jono in 2009.

He had cystic fibrosis, but had a double lung transplant in 2008. However, bugs in his upper respiratory tract infected his lungs.

"He had the most fantastic year," Julie says.

"That's all we wished for was

that he would get one decent breath and he got a whole year."

Last year, all four of Jono's siblings, plus friends and other family members took part in the relay and will be again this year.

There will be a cystic fibrosis team in the relay, which will raise money for CF support.

The two Beaters and Breathers teams will be collecting funds for Hearty Towers, the transplant recovery facility in Auckland.

Kat says that if people have ticked the donor box on their driver's licences, they also need to talk to their family to convey their wishes so they are honoured.

Ross agrees.

"It's extremely important that everybody is a donor, subject to their health being acceptable. To give another person a better

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Ross Southee

quality of life is a great gift."

"It's the biggest gift of all – you cannot give anything bigger than life," Kat says.

CanTeen is the main charity the relay is supporting.

Any transplant recipients wanting to take part in the relay, can contact Julie Fowler on 06 769 6079. People wanting to enter teams in the relay can go online to: mountainrelay.co.nz.