



Transplant recipients and living donors competed in the 2018 Games

Illinois' "Spare Parts" basketball team – all organ transplant recipients -- have been competing at the games since 1996. The competition may be intense at times, as in all team sports, but sportsmanship always prevails. This year's basketball team consisted of Bob Anthony, Geno Bianchi, Jen Klouse, Daisy Martinez, JP Marzano, Michaela Prunty, Brian Stiner, Brad Szczecinski and Jerry Taylor.

Two teams of volleyball players included Bob Anthony, Geno Bianchi, Ralph Dahma, Lisa Givens, Colette Jordan, David Keys, Jen Klouse, JP Marzano, Vince Shavers, Brian Stiner, Suzie Sturm, Brad Szczecinski, and Jerry Taylor.

Individual Team Illinois athletes included:

Bob Anthony was just 18 years old when he was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis in 1966. Over the years he watched as his liver enzymes continued to climb until 1999 when he was diagnosed with primary sclerosing cholangitis (PSC), a slow-moving disease of the bile ducts. "I was told that on average people with PSC need a liver transplant within 11 years," says the Evanston native. "I wasn't too worried because I was still asymptomatic. I was still active and playing sports, especially basketball, and I was still a full-time firefighter/paramedic." By the time he retired in 2010, he had learned more about liver disease and about living donation. And in 2015 as his liver enzymes soared, edema set in, and he was unable to play basketball, he prepared for a transplant. All of his children volunteered to donate, but the first one tested – his daughter Vanessa -- was a match. They underwent a successful liver surgery on July 8, 2015, at Northwestern. His daughter returned to work in August, and though Anthony had a longer recovery, he was back playing the next year for Charley Brown's Windy City Seniors League and competing in seniors' tournaments.

Geno Bianchi, Elmhurst, never knew the cause of stomach discomfort that sent him to the hospital eight years ago. One minute the college student was playing basketball with friends, the next he was at Loyola fighting for his life. Doctors told Bianchi his liver numbers were so high that he would need a transplant right away. One week later and two-and-a-half days on the waiting list, he received a donated liver on May 11, 2010. Within months Bianchi was back playing basketball. He rejoined the Spare Parts basketball team, played volleyball, and bowled for Team Illinois in his third Transplant Games. "I'm just very thankful that God provided me with doctors who knew what to do," he says, "And for organ donation."

Dr. Mitchell Blivaiss, Evanston, joined Team Illinois as the team's first stem cell transplant recipient. Blivaiss was diagnosed in 2014 with myelodysplasia, a form of blood cancer, and had his procedure done on March 13, 2015, at the University of Chicago Medical Center. A practicing pediatrician for 35 years, Blivaiss was rarely ill, having developed immunities from his constant exposures. After a routine physical turned up abnormalities in his blood, that all changed. The chemotherapy he received to treat his cancer before his transplant also returned his immune system to that of a newborn. "After my transplant, I couldn't practice for two years while I was being re-immunized and my immune system redeveloped," he says. "Even when I was cleared to return, I decided not to risk exposures and retired to enjoy life." He currently

teaches at a medical school and enjoys time with his wife, children and six grandchildren. Blivaiss and his family were able to meet his donor last year. An avid runner prior to transplant, Blivaiss competed in track and field events as well as in the cycling races.

Nicole Brown's a fighter, having spent the better part of this year in the intensive care unit at Advocate Christ Medical Center in Oak Lawn after a virus attacked her transplanted heart, and she suffered a stroke. Doctors there shocked her back to life, not once, but three times. During the past nine months, she's had to learn to speak and walk all over again. Now she's back for her second Transplant Games feistier than ever. "I once wondered and because of my few limitations I still wonder if this would be possible again," she says, "but then HE reminds me he always has a plan." Brown recently celebrated her 40th birthday with more appreciation for the gift of life she received five years ago on Feb. 2, 2013. The Chicago native was in dire need of a transplant after being diagnosed with endocarditis. Though Brown has never met the family of the daughter who donated a heart on that "wonderfully glorious morning," she has spoken with them and always has a picture of her donor close by. "She had a gorgeous smile and angelic face," she says. "My mission is to do her wondrous spirit justice." And so she spends her free time advocating for donor awareness. Brown competed in corn hole, winning a Bronze medal with partner Colette Jordan. She also competed in table tennis.

Ralph Dahma, Lindenhurst, lives every moment in gratitude. Just five years ago Dahma's life consisted of dialysis treatments and monthly visits to Rush Medical Center. But after only 17 days on the waiting list for a new kidney, Dahma found the perfect match. "I consider myself very fortunate," he says. A self-proclaimed "danzapalooza director" for the Chicago Jitterbug Club, Dahma has assisted Team Illinois in raising funds to help those who can't afford to attend the Games. He returned in 2018 to compete in new sports for him, the cycling event and 500m freestyle swimming. He also competed in Texas hold'em poker and eight track and field events, including all distance races, the long jump, shot put and softball throw. A member of the 2016 gold medal trivia team, Dahma once again helped defend the title, winning gold in 2018.

It's been more than 30 years since **Susan English** was a college student, but that time in her life will stand out as the beginning of a long journey to good health. As a freshman she became hospitalized with elevated liver enzymes and lost 40 pounds. She recovered, but years later, she was diagnosed with giant cell hepatitis, which had caused some cirrhosis of her liver. Over the next 20 years English battled moderate hepatic encephalopathy, suffered a spontaneous splenic artery aneurysm, endured extended stays in the hospital and rehabilitative care, and sat on the wait list for a new liver three times. Finally in August 2013, English received her gift of life at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. Happy to be returning for her second Transplant Games, English competed in the same sports that earned her medals two years ago - swimming (she won bronze in the 100m freestyle) and team trivia (gold). Read more about her 2018 medals [here](#).

Within three weeks of having symptoms of autoimmune hepatitis, **David Farmer** was in dire need of a liver transplant. He says he was in such bad shape, he doesn't remember much about the operation at Northwestern on, Feb. 18, 2011, except it was "the day after my donor passed away." Farmer, who lives in Chicago, grew up in Cleveland, home of the 2016 Transplant Games. He swam for the high school district championships in the same pool at Cleveland State in which he competed and won a gold, silver and bronze medal. A dedicated health enthusiast and social media presence, Farmer enjoys travel, martial arts, cross fit and all outdoor activities. He not only swam again for Team Illinois in 2018 but also participated in the softball throw.

The longer **Monica Fox**, Flossmoor, spent on the waiting list for a kidney transplant, the more she learned about organ donation. "I learned that people die every day waiting for a transplant," she says. "I didn't want to be one of them." So she became an active advocate for organ donation and the "face of waiting" for many of Gift of Hope's ad campaigns. Almost three years to the day and two days before Thanksgiving November 2016, Fox received her gift of life at UIC hospital. "I received a directed donation from a friend's family, and it was a perfect match," she says. "My recovery has been amazingly easy, my labs have been stable, and my advocacy continues with renewed and reinvigorated purpose." One goal has been to participate in the 2018 Transplant Games. Once an avid Zumba fan, Fox competed in ballroom dancing with partner Vince Shavers (and won the bronze) as well as bowling and racquetball. Accompanying her to Salt Lake City was her daughter, Olivia Fox, who works as a community outreach coordinator for Gift of Hope and hosts "Let's Talk Donation" on CANTV.

How to spot **Lisa Givens**, Berwyn, among the athletes in the room? Look for the lady dressed head to toe in green. Known for her bright costumes and enthusiastic spirit, Givens will have help this time around. "I'm bringing my mini-me, my granddaughter," she says, "We'll going to have lots of fun." Not long ago the former beauty shop owner couldn't have imagined the full life she leads now. After eight years on dialysis, Givens heard the words many on the transplant list dream of: We have a kidney. That was Jan. 21, 1999; the procedure transpired at Rush University Hospital. "Someone who never met me saved my life," she says. "To that donor family, how do I say thank you? I say thank you, thank you and thank you from the bottom of my heart." Givens has competed in three Transplant Games, winning a gold medal in doubles bowling and a silver and bronze in track and field in the 2016 Transplant Games. This year she learned how to swim so she could compete in the 50 freestyle. Unfortunately, an injury in track and field sidelined her from competing, but she and her granddaughter cheered others.

Colette Jordan, Lisle, serves as treasurer of Transplant Life Illinois and handles most of the team logistics. She first became involved with the Games in 2008 (Pittsburgh). "I went to honor my anonymous hero donor for the gift of life and help showcase the success of transplantation," she says. "I was hooked." Jordan received a liver transplant Nov. 1, 2006, at Northwestern. She has since met and remains close to the family of her hero donor Tom Kaiserauer. "I created a quilt square honoring Tom," Jordan says. "What an incredible experience it was to be at the Opening Ceremony as the quilt was carried into the Stadium by donor family members while crowds were cheering on Team Illinois!" Jordan has competed in five Transplant Games and one international games, winning her first gold medal in doubles bowling in 2016. She competed this year in corn hole, winning the Bronze with partner Nikki Brown, darts and table tennis. She also jumped in last minute as a sub on Team Volleyball.

Weightlifting put Havana Fire Chief **John Kachanuk** in the hospital 14 years ago. On and off battles with back pain and in his lower legs eventually led to spine fusion surgery Feb. 8, 2013, at Methodist Hospital in Peoria (now Unity Point). "I had horrible back pain that wouldn't allow me to do much other than get comfortable," he says. "I loved doing anything physical - yard work, house renovation, weight lifting and running." Doctors told him that his pain would be gone and with it his active lifestyle. Instead, Kachanuk overcame the odds: He recently competed in his first-ever Tough Mudder, a hardcore obstacle race that challenges the toughest of athletes. He competed in his second Transplant Games, once again in track and field winning the yet another medal. Kachanuk is the team's only bone graft/tissue transplant recipient competing in Salt Lake City.

Jennifer Klouse has competed in 13 Transplant Games, including the World TGA, the British Transplant Games and the Australian Transplant Games, collecting medals and making friends all over the world. Klouse was 17 when she experienced organ failure as a result of Wilson's

disease, a buildup of copper in the liver. Then a high school student in Michigan, Klouse received her new liver from a deceased donor on Sept. 15, 1998, less than 24 hours after placement as #1 on the waiting list. Klouse, who lives in Mokena, works as the director of admissions for Trinity Services in New Lenox. She continues to lead an active life, despite breaking a foot while competing at the 2017 World Games in Spain. She's a mainstay of the "Spare Parts" basketball team as well as team volleyball and ran the 4x400 in track in field.

Emil Lumperdean, received the gift of a kidney on Sept. 04, 2016, at Rush University Medical Center.

Daisy Martinez is a kidney transplant recipient from Wheaton. She received her gift of life on July 17, 2014, at UIC hospital in Chicago.

The youngest member of Team Illinois at just 15 years old is **Ramiro Martinez** from Yorkville. He received a heart transplant on Feb. 1, 2003, at Lurie Children's Hospital in Chicago. His mom Renee Brockman recalls how quickly his illness took hold. "He came down with what we thought was the flu in October 2012," she says. "After he was diagnosed with dilated cardiomyopathy, he spent just four days on the transplant list. We still don't know why his heart grew so large so quickly." Now a freshman at Marmion Academy in Aurora, Martinez has joined his high school swim team and will swim the 50m breaststroke and 50 and 100m freestyle for Team Illinois. He also enjoys bass fishing, baseball and reading. "We feel very blessed and appreciative of the gift of life, and that Ramiro has the opportunity to compete in the Transplant Games," Brockman says.

Team Manager **JP Marzano**, Chicago, and his family have been involved with the transplant community for more than 20 years, and the Games have been a huge part of his life. Diagnosed at age 16 with a degenerative kidney disease called Alport syndrome, Marzano has been on two "tours of duty" for kidney dialysis and has had three transplants - all from living donors. His father Jim was donor #1; his mother's friend Nan Vaile #2; and one of his best friends from high school, Ben Kraus, became donor #3 in 2007 at Duke University Hospital. "All are my heroes," Marzano says. "My mother was also a kidney recipient, and my Aunt Margie was her living donor. Needless to say transplantation runs in the family." Marzano first participated in the TGA in 1996 (Salt Lake City) as a member of the inaugural Spare Parts basketball team. He returned in 2010 and had so much fun reuniting with people that he has gone to every Games since. He will return to Salt Lake City in 2018 where he competed in team basketball, pickle ball, table tennis, tennis (singles and mixed doubles) and team volleyball.

Ross Owens participated in the World Transplant Games in 2017 (Spain) and has been hooked ever since. He's been tirelessly advocating for organ donation from his home in Hillsboro and training extensively for the 2018 Transplant Games in Salt Lake City. "I have spent the last two years getting ready, losing weight, and gaining strength," he says. "I am scheduled for eight events over five days. I hope to do well. Wish me luck." Owens will compete in cycling, pickle ball, track and field events, and team trivia. Owens served in the U.S. Army from 1970 to 1974, then became a special educator with the Illinois Department of Corrections. He received a liver transplant March 2011 at St. Louis University Hospital. "My wife Marie and I are very excited to continue competing, and showing the world there is life after an organ transplant," he says. "Everyone should sign up for organ donation. It saved my life and may help save the life of someone else you know."

Michaela Prunty has her mother (Isa Rodriguez, *see below*) to thank for her participation in the Transplant Games. After all it was her mother who donated part of her liver to Prunty when she was a baby. Born healthy, Prunty was diagnosed with biliary atresia, a disease of the bile ducts

leading into the liver, at just three months of age. Her transplant took place May 31, 2001, at University of Chicago Med when she was a year old. She recently celebrated her 17th “transplantaversary.” What’s next for the rising senior? She played team basketball and swimming for Team Illinois at the 2018 Transplant Games.

Sisters Wanda and **Agnieszka Rapacz** were close, despite the fact that Rapacz lived in Illinois, and Wanda lived in their native Poland. But in 2002 when Rapacz’ kidney began to fail for no apparent reason, Wanda was right there by her side. After 11 months on dialysis, Rapacz received a new kidney on Dec. 2, 2002, at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn. Her donor --her sister Wanda. Today Rapacz lives in Lake in the Hills and owns a successful tea shop in downtown Chicago, has two daughters and is back doing what she loves -- swimming, skiing and drinking tea. She’s attended three US Transplant Games and World Transplant Games in Sweden and South Africa and won another gold medal in swimming at the 2018 Transplant Games. But every couple of years, she’s back in Poland, celebrating the gift of life with her sister.

A living hero to her daughter Michaela Prunty (*see above*), **Isa Rodriquez** feels blessed that she was a match for her infant daughter. Prunty was diagnosed with biliary atresia at just three months old and was failing to thrive. At eight months doctors determined she would need a transplant, and on May 31, 2001, the mother-daughter duo became connected as few ever are. Normally a volunteer at the Transplant Games, Rodriquez looks forward to competing for the first time in bowling. She’s a tireless advocate for organ donation, taking part in the gathering of living donors in April at the Bean vying for a place in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. Rodriguez also coordinates uniforms for Team Illinois.

Retired business owner **Jeff Schiff**, Hoffman Estates, always knew he would need a kidney transplant. His mother passed away at age 48 from the hereditary polycystic kidney disease. He led an active lifestyle and owned a small air freight trucking company, but when his kidneys started failing, he had to cut back on playing sports. His wife Nancy donated a kidney to him on April 5, 2000, at Rush University Hospital. He returned to sports by competing in four US Transplant Games between 2002 and 2008 as well as in the 2004 Australian Transplant Games, winning medals in table tennis, volleyball and the softball throw. Then his transplanted kidney failed; he returned to dialysis and retired. In 2012 he received another kidney from a deceased donor. The oldest team member, “Schifty” competed in table tennis, in which he won Gold in 2016 (Cleveland), and in several track and field events, including the 100 and 200m runs, discus, shot put and the softball throw.

Most people are superstitious about the number 13, but **Vince Shavers**, Naperville, considers 13 his lucky number. Shavers was diagnosed with end-stage renal disease on Friday the 13th in 2013. “It was the day my life was saved,” he says. “It was a turning point in my life. I was immediately placed on dialysis and started a new regiment.” Throughout years on dialysis, several friends, whom he refers to as his “Angel Crew,” rallied to his aid offering to take him to doctor appointments, sitting with him during dialysis, taking him to lunch or dinner and even doing his laundry. Two years later, a childhood friend, Rachel Koch, donated her kidney and on May 18, 2015, they forged a new bond. Another friend offered him a place to recuperate after his transplant. “I’m still living with them!” he says. “They became instant caregivers offering support to allow me time to re-engage and make life better than it was.” Shavers won gold in ballroom dancing with partner Monica Fox, darts and team trivia at the 2018 Transplant Games (Salt Lake City).

Alice Siete-Nevel became a living kidney donor to her mother Frances Olivarez on July 3, 1996, at UCLA. “I had given her 11 years and five months more wonderful time with our family,” she

says. "Since then the Games have been a tribute to my mother." Siete-Nevel has attended the Games since 2006. She's earned six medals and is looking forward to getting a few more. "I need eight more medals so that I can give one to each of my 14 grandkids," she says. "I'm leaving them medals to keep my legacy going and to educate them about organ donation awareness." Siete-Nevel serves as an ambassador for Gift of Hope in the Rockford area and recently participated in the *Guinness Book* gathering for living donors. She bowled for Team Illinois as well as competed in the softball throw and walked the 5k. "I've been walking every day in anticipation," she says. "I'm so excited to compete in memory of my mother."

Brian Stiner, Batavia, serves as vice-president of Transplant Life Illinois. He has competed in multiple sports in seven Transplant Games, and this year returns as team sports captain. Diagnosed with IgA nephropathy as a young adult, Stiner soon needed a kidney. His sister became his hero donor on June 22, 2001, at Chicago Med. His transplantation has enabled him to continue traveling with his job as an engineer, share in adventures with his family, and compete for Team Illinois in Salt Lake City. He played for the Spare Parts basketball team and played team volleyball.

If you search for **Suzie Sturm** using social media, you might find her using the hashtag #DoItForTom. Tom is the name of her donor, the 25-year-old who gifted her a new liver on Sept. 27, 2016, at the University of Illinois-Chicago. Sturm was diagnosed in 2014 with nonalcoholic fatty liver disease after a fall down a flight of stairs sent her to the emergency room. "At the time my two daughters were planning their weddings, and two of my grandchildren were expected any time," she says. "I had a lot to look forward to, and I just prayed that God would make me healthy again." A trip to visit friends in Florida landed her back in the hospital, but this time she had a God wink. "Doctors told me I needed to return home and get on the transplant list," she says. "I was scared, but then our friend lifted up his shirt to show us his transplant scar and said, 'I had one 14 years ago, and you're going to be fine sweetheart.'" Thanks to Tom she's alive, back at work, enjoying her grandchildren, sewing her signature pillows, and loving her new outlook on life. If you search online you might also find Sturm on the local Peoria news. WEEK-TV ran a story earlier this year on Sturm as she was training for the swimming events at the 2018 Transplant Games. #DoItForTom

The best man at the wedding of **Brad Szczecinski** was none other than his living kidney donor. As Szczecinski explains, he was fresh out of college just trying to make a life in Chicago when he became ill. Diagnosed with IgA nephropathy, a rare kidney disease, he was one of the 40 percent to develop end-stage kidney failure. Were it not for Joe Barrett, whom he met at church and had only known for two weeks, Szczecinski might still be waiting, or worse. On Nov. 14, 1996, the two became friends for life. As a transplant athlete, Szczecinski has traveled the world, often participating in the US and World Transplant Games. He has won more than 30 medals over the past 20 years, and, he says, he owes it all to Joe Barrett. Szczecinski, who has served as president of Transplant Life Illinois the past two years, competed once again in swimming as well as team basketball and volleyball with his wife Allie by his side.

Jerry Taylor knows what it's like to depend on medication. He was diagnosed with sudden onset focal segmental glomerulosclerosis (FSGS) in 2004 as a freshman in college. He started taking medication to control his symptoms, but when an administrative snafu canceled his insurance, he was at a loss. "At that time I was feeling better without the meds," he says, "but I was actually doing more harm to my kidneys." Upon graduation from Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Taylor moved back to Chicago, got a job with insurance, and started dialysis, where he spent the next eight years until he got the call on Feb. 1, 2017. "I have a brand new life," he says. "I'm doing things I was not able to do on dialysis. Having energy, getting to

travel is just an amazing experience." Taylor was looking forward to participating in his first Transplant Games in bowling, pickle ball, team basketball and team volleyball.

Barbara Thomas, Brookfield, not only works for Gift of Hope Organ and Tissue Donor Network, but she also has firsthand experience as a living donor. On Oct. 22, 2009, at Loyola, Thomas donated a kidney to her then tenant, James Love. At the time, she worked elsewhere. The very first thing my boss said to me was, 'You know you don't have any vacation days or sick days left.'" She soon discovered there weren't a lot of financial resources available to donors. So she founded the Heal with Love Foundation, named for her recipient, to reimburse living donors for their lost wages during recovery from transplant surgery. "No one should have to worry about how to pay their bills while trying to recover from this major, life-changing surgery," she says. "While not everyone can donate a kidney, we can all help support someone else who can." Thomas attended the 2016 Games (Cleveland) for the first time and was hooked. She competed in Salt Lake City in several swimming events as well as played on the gold medal-winning trivia team.

She was just a little girl who enjoyed riding her bike and playing with friends when **Kim VanEngelenburg** suddenly got sick. Doctors at the Wyler Children's Hospital [now the University of Chicago] diagnosed Hepatitis C, liver disease rare in children. She was in the hospital more than she was out, and without a transplant, she wouldn't have made it. That was 30 years ago. VanEngelenburg received the first of two transplants on April 19, 1988, and another on Aug. 22, 1993, due to rejection. A special education teacher in Champaign, VanEngelenburg continues to amaze by participating in her ninth Transplant Games. Already a gold medalist in bowling, VanEngelenburg concentrated this August on winning in Texas hold 'em poker.

Nate Weimer, Naperville, has won a lot of medals playing basketball on the Spare Parts team at numerous Transplant Games. But his bowling skills are what truly sets him apart, even at the World Games. He has won more gold medals in bowling, be it solo or with a partner, than any other transplant athlete. Bowling has been his passion since he was eight years old. He currently coaches at one of the local bowling alleys. Weimer had a double lung transplant Sept. 30, 1999, and a kidney transplant Sept. 6, 2006. Despite a few health setbacks this past year, he continued his winning streak in Salt Lake City.

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