A NEWSLETTER OF GIFT OF LIFE TRANSPLANT HOUSE

SHARING THE gift

SPRING/SUMMER 2025

Offering Hope & Healing

Gift of Life TRANSPLANT HOUSE
Rochester, MN



New Executive Director Brings Heart and Compassion to Gift of Life

By Kayla Antony

From the moment she walked through the doors of the Gift of Life Transplant House, it was clear to Stephanie Donovan, Gift of Life's new Executive Director, that this place was something special.

“Everyone here is here for the right reasons, I can feel that,” she shared. With a warm, energetic presence and a personal tie to the transplant world, the new Executive Director is already making her mark.

Having lived in the Byron/Rochester area since 2004, she’s no stranger to the region—or the challenges facing those going through medical journeys. Her professional path has been anything but linear, winding through health care, higher education, and even small business ownership. Each chapter has equipped her with tools she’s now bringing to the table at Gift of Life.

Her most recent role was at Zumbro Valley Health Center as Program Manager, while before that, she served as a campus director at a private college. At DaVita Rochester Dialysis Clinic, she was introduced to the transplant world through patients receiving dialysis—a small but meaningful preview of what would become a bigger mission later in life.

Even more powerful is the personal connection that led her here. Her mom, a transplant nurse, used to speak about her work with passion and





care. Her stepdad donated a kidney to his sister. Her grandma underwent dialysis. “I grew up hearing stories about transplant patients,” she said. “I listened to my mom talk about the strength of her patients. She’s my hero.”

That heart for people and passion for purpose led her to Gift of Life Transplant House—a role she describes as “a perfect fit” and one where she immediately felt at home. “This place fills my cup,” she said. “It’s rewarding in a way I hadn’t felt in a long time.”

Her vision for the organization is focused on growth, connection, and innovation—starting with the upcoming opening of the pediatric house. “That’s one of my top priorities,” Donovan shared. “We want to bring awareness to it, make the grand opening strong and meaningful, and really empower the team around that mission." She’s also eager to explore new event opportunities and strengthen both existing and new community collaborations.

Team building and staff morale are also at the top of her leadership list. She hopes to inspire and motivate her staff, encouraging open communication, creative ideas, and a shared sense of purpose.

Donovan is proud of taking a personal risk: buying into and co-owning a coffee shop right after COVID—while still working full-time. That mindset of possibility is something she carries into her leadership. “I want people to feel seen for their potential—even when they don’t see it in themselves.”

Outside of work, she lives a full and joyful life with her husband and two boys. She’s a classic “sports mom,” loves camping and being outdoors, has two dogs, and enjoys baking, cooking, and entertaining. “I love gathering people together, making them feel welcome, and just having fun,” she said with a laugh. And yes—if you ask her for a fun fact—she’ll proudly share that she grew up on a farm. That farm-girl work ethic, it seems, never left her.

As she looks ahead to her first year in the role, she’s focused on relationships—deepening ties with longtime supporters while welcoming new ones to the fold. Networking, collaboration, and communication will be key, especially as the organization grows and adapts to meet new needs.

More than anything, Donovan wants every guest, caregiver, volunteer, and staff member to feel comfortable coming to her. With heart, hustle, and a whole lot of passion, the Gift of Life Transplant House is in strong hands—and poised for a future filled with community, compassion, and continued impact.

Our New Staff

Tristen Trogstad
Receptionist



Kaitlyn Crowley
Housekeeper





Letter from Our Board President

Lori Ewoldt



Dear guests, staff, volunteers, donors, and friends,

I am honored to be the incoming President of the Board of Directors for Gift of Life Transplant House! My nearly 40-year career at Mayo Clinic started in 1984, the same year that founder Ed Pompeian championed the opening of the original Gift of Life Transplant House. I was lucky enough to meet Ed when I started working in the Transplant Center in 2012. He is a legend in my eyes.

Our new Executive Director (Stephanie Donovan) is off to a great start. Stephanie joined us in time to participate in the many activities associated with "Donate Life Month" in April. She has already demonstrated a strong commitment to service and to our experienced staff at Gift of Life. I look forward to working with Stephanie and learning from her. Please stop by and say hello to Stephanie when you have the chance!

Trivia for the day: did you know that Gift of Life House is the largest transplant hospitality house in the country? We currently have 84 guest rooms, and that number will be going up with the impending opening of the Pediatric Transplant House at 624 West Center Street. The finishing touches are being put in place and the official opening date will be announced very soon. Many thanks to those who responded to our recent Facebook "wish list" request for kitchen supplies – we are humbled by your generosity! I would also like to thank Olivia Odenbrett and the team at Leo's Legacy for organizing a book drive to benefit our Pediatric House.

I retired from Mayo in early 2024 and the 12 years I spent in transplant administration are among my favorite experiences. My most personal experience with Gift of Life came in 2012 when my best friend from high school needed a stem cell transplant and I encouraged her to stay at Gift of Life. I did that because I knew from my workplace that Gift of Life was an important resource for our transplant patients. I learned so much more by visiting her at Gift of Life and seeing that experience through her eyes. In my opinion, the key to Gift of Life's success is the day-to-day environment that is created and fostered among the guests, caregivers, and the staff. Transplant is a journey, and it can have difficult periods. Camaraderie is a powerful tool. Friendship and knowing that there are people who have "walked in your shoes" is an invaluable perspective. "A Home That Helps and Heals" became much more personal and impactful because of the support she received at Gift of Life.

As I close out this message, please join me in extending a super-sized THANK YOU to Mary Wilder as she recently retired from the Executive Director role. I have long admired Mary, and I can confidently say that Gift of Life Transplant House is a stronger organization because of her leadership. She has handled challenges with grace, composure, and an appropriate sense of humor. It truly was a privilege to work with her and I am honored to call her my friend.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to meeting many of you in the coming months and years.

Lori



Outgoing Letter

Cyle Erie



Greetings, and Happy Spring!

As my term as President of the Board of Directors for Gift of Life Transplant House nears the end, I find myself reflecting on the organization. An overarching theme that I find on reflection, and I will forever take away from my time serving the organization, is IMPACT. In the 41 years the Gift of Life Transplant House has formally existed, the lives positively impacted is unimaginable. I can't even guess a number, but if I tried, I would start by just looking at the groups of people both impacting and being impacted. Guests, caregivers, staff, volunteers, donors, partners of the organization, care teams, anyone who has visited the house, anyone who has heard the story, the list goes on and on.

Another chapter of my personal story was written recently, when my father passed away. He was a three-time transplant recipient, including his sister as a living donor, and an incredibly selfless living donor through the paired exchange program. The gifts of life he received prolonged his life by decades, improved his quality of life, and allowed him and our entire family to experience countless life moments together (for example, enjoying time with 18 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren). One of Dad's legacies was that of giving. In his last selfless act of giving, he donated his body to science through Mayo Clinic's Anatomical Bequest program. This gave him and our family great comfort and pride knowing that the Gift of Life is "paid forward" and lives will continue to be impacted through advancing medical education.

Another theme from reflection is LEGACY. This incredible organization has not become what it has today by chance. It is a truly unique and special place because it is the Legacy of so many wonderful dedicated and committed people.

I am going to extend two invitations to you. If you haven't had the pleasure of experiencing first-hand the Gift of Life Transplant House, come take a look. You will be nothing short of amazed and impacted. The second thing I would like to invite you to do is consider making the Gift of Life Transplant House part of your Legacy. Your generosity will help ensure that the mission lives on and many more lives will be positively Impacted.

Thank you for your interest in and support of this incredible organization. It's been an honor serving as its Board President.



Forever 8

Kambrynn was an outgoing, friendly, empathetic, and helpful young girl who touched countless lives in her short eight years. In November 2024, she tragically lost her life in a motor vehicle accident. Through the selfless gift of organ donation, Kambrynn continues to live on—saving three lives and giving hope to others.

In honor of her beautiful spirit, Kambrynn's sister Kinsley has lovingly created "Forever 8" blankets for each of the 84 guests staying at the Gift of Life Transplant House. These blankets are a tribute to the warmth, kindness, and compassion Kambrynn showed every day. On April 17, 2025, the Ronningen family visited the Gift of Life Transplant House to distribute the "Forever 8" blankets along with cupcakes, sharing Kambrynn's legacy of love and generosity with others in a truly special way.





Mary's Farewell

It has been my immense joy to serve as the Executive Director of Gift of Life Transplant House for nearly 8 years! You all are dear and precious to me and I will miss you all! Here is my personal email and my personal cell phone:

Mary@poweroffamily.org
952.956.4497

I would be delighted to join you for a cup of coffee the next time you are in town!

5TH ANNUAL GIFT OF LIFE CAR SHOW & PICKLEBALL TOURNAMENT





17 AUGUST
11:00a – 2:00p

10:00 AM	Vehicle registration
12:00 PM	Judging begins
1:00 PM	Trophies awarded

The 40th Anniversary in Review

2024 marked the 40th Anniversary of Gift of Life Transplant House and it was a year to remember!

Our New Year's Eve Ball kicked off the 40th Anniversary. Guests danced the night away to the Bluewater Kings Band, delicious food, and a champagne toast at midnight.

Our 40th Anniversary banner flags survived winter, and spring brought us into DonateLife Month and the Walk of Remembrance. The day was beautiful and allowed us to have our sand ceremony on the front lawn of Gift of Life.

We held our 40th Anniversary Golf Tournament in July and the 4th Annual Car Show in August!

Forty years to the day, December 10th, 2024, guests received a special treat – Pay It Like It Was 1984. Guests were charged $6.00 in 1984 and rather than charging $30.00 for December 10th, guests were charged $6.00.

But perhaps most momentous was the private screening of the 40th Anniversary documentary, "Gift of Life, A Journey of Faith, A Legacy of Hope." Held at CMX Theaters, a select group of former board members, current board members, friends and the Pompeian Family had the privilege of watching this powerful story of the history of Gift of Life.

We would like you to have the opportunity to watch this moving documentary! Credit must go to our producer and videographer, Matt Eng. Matt has been working with Gift of Life since 2019 as our videographer.

To scan a QR code, simply open your phone's camera and point it at the QR code.









Gift of Life Pediatric Transplant House to Open (hopefully) in June

Lesson learned: Renovating a house built in 1917 is full of unexpected challenges. In a moment of utter discouragement, our Project Manager even declared the house was cursed and he didn't know if he would ever be able to get it finished.

I found myself frustrated, exasperated, discouraged, and disheartened until a thought crossed my mind one day.

We were renovating the house to become a safe haven for families of transplant children. Yet what type of frustration, exasperation, and discouragement had these children, and their families faced. All of a sudden, it seemed appropriate to me – almost as though the house itself was reminding us that it was worth it all; that its walls would envelop families with not only warmth, but also bring an energy of resolve and resilience.

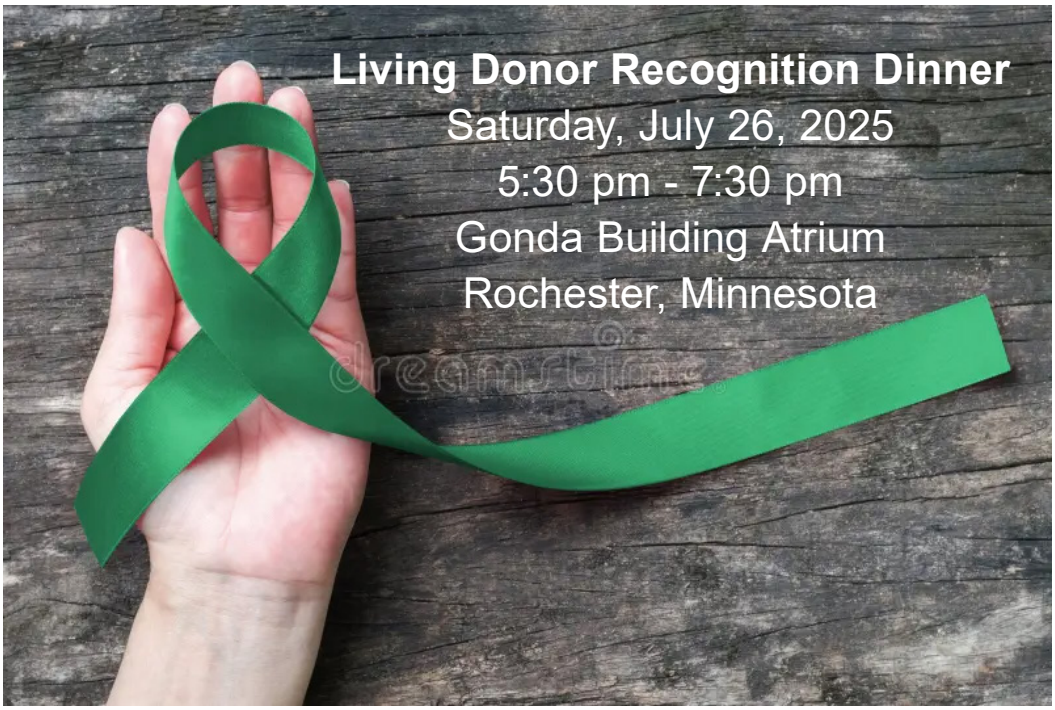
What had nearly caused me to really dislike the house now brought a depth of love for it and all it would mean in the years to come.



And just like that – it was finished. The only thing we are waiting for is the Fire Marshall inspection, having received our certificate of occupancy and our lodging license. The furniture is ready to order and we have generous donors who will purchase that; many of the items we needed for the kitchen have been received, and those small touches that transform a house into a home remain to be done!



Save the Date - Living Donor Recognition



You must have been a living donor through Mayo Clinic. If you do not receive an invitation in May or June, please contact Stephanie Donovan, Executive Director, at sdonovan@gift-of-life.org.

Day of Remembrance

Mayo Clinic celebrated the 11th Day of Remembrance on Friday, April 11, 2025, honoring organ donors whose selfless gift of life gave transplant recipients a second chance.

A five-person panel, each with a personal connection to donation, shared heartfelt stories. Among them were a cornea recipient, two transplant recipients, and two donor families—each offering a powerful testimony to the life-changing impact of organ donation.

Mary Wilder, former Executive Director of the Gift of Life Transplant House, led a symbolic sand ceremony. This moving ritual illustrated how the lives of donors and recipients become forever intertwined. The event concluded with the raising of the Donate Life flag and a moment of silence in remembrance and gratitude.





SAVE THE DATE

For the annual

TRANSPLANT PICNIC!

Sunday, July 27th

Cascade Lake Park | More information to follow





SAVE THE DATE FOR THE

Gift of Life Golf Tournament

July 21st, 2025

Rochester Golf Country Club



2025 Events

Day of Remembrance









Timmay 5K











VOLUNTEER APPRECIATION WEEK GIFT



MARY'S RETIREMENT PARTY



MARY'S RETIREMENT PARTY



MARY'S RETIREMENT PARTY



MARY'S RETIREMENT PARTY

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Rochester, MN

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Gift of Life Transplant House Mission Statement

The mission of Gift of Life Transplant House is to provide transplant patients and their caregivers with high quality, affordable accommodations in a supportive, home-like environment.

Gift of Life Inc.
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