

Organ donor advocate dies awaiting kidney

BY MAUREEN O'DONNELL Staff Reporter/modonnell@suntimes.com January 9, 2013 1:32PM

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Vikki Tulcus, who appeared in a powerful advertising campaign promoting organ donation in Illinois, died Wednesday while awaiting a kidney transplant. She was 43.

Ms. Tulcus worked as an advocate for organ and tissue donation in the office of Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White, whose office encourages organ donation through sign-ups for an organ and tissue-donor registry when people apply for drivers' licenses.

She appeared in a TV spot in which she leafed through a photo album of donors and recipients, as the Pretenders' "I'll Stand by You" played in the background.

In a voiceover for the ad, created by the advertising agency Adelstein/Liston, Ms. Tulcus said, "Last year, I got sick, and I found out I need a kidney. Before, my job depended on the organ-donor program. Now, my life depends on it."

Ms. Tulcus drove home the need for donors, looking into the camera and telling viewers: "Be an organ donor. Because life goes on."

Hundreds of people signed up to be donors because of her, according to White, who encourages people to register online to be donors at www.lifegoeson.com, or by calling the agency toll-free at 1-800-210-2106, or by signing up at any driver's license facility.

Before Ms. Tulcus joined his office, where she worked in downtown Chicago, she worked for Gift of Hope Organ & Tissue Donor Network, talking with families of donors, meeting with them in hospitals in some of the darkest hours of their lives, he said.

"She'd be in the hospitals, counseling families, trying to encourage families to have their loved ones' organs donated, which is not easy," White said. "I lost a great friend, an outstanding employee and a person who I'd give my right arm to have back among us."

Ms. Tulcus, who lived in Westmont, described her health struggles in a Gift of Hope blog in which she wrote: "My personal and professional lives became enmeshed on November 13, 2009, when I became extremely ill. I knew something was drastically wrong when breathing became difficult, and I grew too weak to walk. I thought it was just an extreme asthma attack and went to the emergency room after my condition worsened. My situation was critical, and doctors worked to save my life. Within hours, I was diagnosed with Wegner's Syndrome — a rare, autoimmune disease that is chronic and can be fatal. I was told that I was in renal failure and required immediate dialysis.

"Since that day, my life has changed dramatically. I continue to work full time for the Illinois secretary of state and juggle the responsibilities of daily life. But, each night, I hook myself up to a machine that spends the next 10 hours doing the work that my kidneys no longer can do. My name has been added to the national transplant waiting list for a kidney. Each day, I hope for my life-saving gift. Unfortunately, in Illinois, the average wait time for a kidney transplant is approximately seven years.

"As I wait for a new kidney, I find hope in the stories of recipients who are grateful for their second chance at life. When I search for a meaning for my illness, I am inspired by stories of heroes who have selflessly donated their organs and tissue to save others. Each day that I wait, I am hopeful that a donor will save my life."

Ms. Tulcus was engaged to be married. She and her fiance, Dan Lietz, picked Sept. 21 for their wedding because of a song she loved, "September," by the band Earth, Wind and Fire, which includes the lines:

*"Do you remember
the 21st of September?"*

Love was changing the minds of pretenders

While chasing the clouds away."

After she died Wednesday, he stopped at a restaurant. The song playing on the sound system, he said, was "September." Ms. Tulcus is also survived by her brothers, Scott and Steve. Friends and family will begin gathering at 10 a.m. Jan. 19 at Holy Trinity Church, 111 S. Cass, Westmont. A burial mass is scheduled at 10:30 a.m. Graveside services will follow at Clarendon Hills Cemetery in Darien.
