

The book cover features a white central panel on a background of light teal and peach. Green foliage, including leaves and buds, is illustrated on the left and right sides. The title is centered in a large, black, serif font.

My Transplant Story

EMILIN
MATHEW



Chapter 1 - Eyes, Heart, Kidney

Striking Blue eyes.

Two years later, I still can't forget those eyes.



Date: June 26, 2022

Location: Margaritaville, Hollywood FL



My Final Gift

It is now time for me to move on
Into the dusk, but also the dawn.

I will remain as the morning comes
As I've left behind a gift for someone.
So another may walk, may talk, may see
Where their life was locked, I offered a key.

I am a donor to someone in need
My final gift, my final deed.

#DonateLife

“Quiet, niño,” the mother sitting across me gently hushed at her son as she patted down her daughter’s dress. The children were excitedly looking at the big plates of food in front of them and boisterously humming along with the violin playing in the background. But, as I looked around the big ceremony hall, the music was received differently by the adults who were somber, hesitant about the heavy emotions that were soon to be unlocked.

As for me, I had no idea what to expect. In all honesty, I was simply accompanying my mother and brother to Jackson Memorial Hospital’s annual organ donation remembrance ceremony because my brother wanted to volunteer for Life Alliance, an organ donation activist agency in Miami, Florida. In a way, I was more similar to the young children: innocent and unaware of the pain that these families had been through.





Organ Donation Remembrance Ceremony



Before this day, I had no experience with organ donation. I don't think I've met an organ donor and I wasn't one myself so I was curious to hear what brought each of these families together. I turned to the mother across from me and curiously asked her how she was involved in organ donation. Her eyes softened as she started talking fondly about her mother. See, they had moved from Nicaragua in hopes of a better life. She worked hard, she was committed to her family, and the dream that the new country offered her. In death, she offered her life, her organ for another person in need. "But, if my mother was the patient in need of the organ, they wouldn't have given it to her. They're fast to take from immigrants, but slow to offer anything in return." For the next 15 minutes, I learned about the biases in the organ transplant process. Some of the requirements necessary like having a stable home and supportive family close by to take care of you seem logical,



yet hurt low-income immigrants that are struggling to pay rent and feed families. The irony was infuriating. I had expected the medical field of “gift of life” to be pure and honest. To take someone’s organ and be unethical and unfair about its distribution is insulting. As these thoughts marinated in my head, a couple took the stage.

You know sometimes when you don’t know anything about a person, but you understand them at first sight. Nothing is said but when you look at them, you really see who they are. Sometimes it takes years, sometimes it happens instantly, sometimes it never happens, and sometimes, as it happened to me, it happens with someone who you’ll never even get a chance to meet. That’s how I felt when the lovely, kind couple started talking about their son Diego. He was 16 when he passed away in a lake accident, the same age I was when I heard his story.



They described him as passionate, a great soccer player, a funny child, and most importantly, kindhearted. As they continued on with the story, I found myself sobbing harder and harder. I've always been an emotional person. No matter what happens, I've cried at the end of every movie whether it's when a character dies or simply the realization that that two hour story was no longer a part of my real life. But, this was the first time I had felt a deep, pure sadness in life in the most genuine sense of the word. The understanding that the world required such hard, cruel decisions from kind people.

Diego was hospitalized for a week, but after his parents talked to a family whose daughter had received an organ transplant, they decided to transform the pain that they felt into a gift of life for another family. Diego's blue eyes, heart, kidney, and other tissues were given to



save three lives. My crying turned into whimpering as I felt the pain that a mother and father must feel knowing that the eyes of their deceased son was roaming the earth, that their son's kind and passionate heart was beating in someone else.

How selfless and pure hearted Diego's parents must be to make such a sacrifice. To power through every single day fighting to save other lives and raising awareness for organ donation, honoring Diego's life. I looked around the large room and saw a community of like minded and like hearted people. Strong. Compassionate. Driven. Diego's parents didn't collapse or give up. They're now prominent organizers of events like 5Ks to honor Diego and speak to raise awareness.

They're the reason I want to go into organ transplantation. I want to honor the gift of life that people like Diego offer. I want to help other families get a chance to



continue making new stories with the gift of a new organ. At the center of organ transplantation is life. I've never been truly grateful for my own gift of life or those of all the wonderful people around me, until I met Diego. His story continues to inspire people like me and I'll always honor him, and all the other brave souls.





Chapter 2 - Open Heart

The ultimate sign of trust.

Date: June 26, 2022
Location: Miami Transplant Institute





I couldn't breathe with the duckbill COVID mask strap searing into my head. That and the fact that there was the smell of burning flesh right in front of me was nauseating. It was just a normal, tiring day at the transplant center but at around 6pm when I was about to wrap up for the day, the team was rushing in anticipation of the heart transplant. The four hours I spent in OR 42's heart transplant surgery was not what I had expected.

For starters, I was shocked with Mark's vulnerability as he lay anesthetized in front of me and twelve other strangers. It reminded me of how my catechism teachers would tell us how Jesus laid down his life so vulnerably on the cross. He placed his life in our hands, in the hands of two surgeons and a bunch of staff he had probably never met. That trust that he and his family must've had in the hospital and the doctors is in my opinion, the purest kind of trust one can have.



To truly place your life in the hands of others and be confident they'll do everything they can to give you another chance of life. The ultimate sign of trust. I'm grateful for being able to witness and understand such a beautiful experience between people.

I learned that the OR wasn't a quiet, stressful, and robotic environment as I had expected. Most of us probably think it's a deafening silence with not a drop of sound and that the room is a super high pressure cooker. But, in reality, the two surgeons chatted in Portuguese and laughed together as we waited for the heart to arrive. There was a youtube video of the Top 50 Pop songs playing in the background and at times the surgical physician assistants would break into song with each other. It felt like a very loving environment to birth a new life.



For most of the surgery, I stood behind Mark's head with the anesthesiology team where they monitored his breathing, took images of his heart, and ensured he was asleep the whole surgery. At about 8:40 pm, I saw Mark's old heart come out. It was clearly weakly beating in his chest, almost like a running clock for the little time he had left with that heart. I saw the surgeons snip away the arteries that held his heart in place to his body and lift out a large, deflated heart, the size of a football. I saw the last pumps it beat before his heart stopped in a cold, empty container. They said he had a congenital heart condition that enlarged his heart and it was getting too strained and too weak to support Mark's large, lively body. For about an hour, Mark Golden was heartless. He was running on perfused blood. An hour later, the new heart arrived and I saw life restored to Mark's body.



I never thought I'd see Mark again. But, a month later as I shifted from shadowing in the Surgical Intensive Care Unit to the transplant clinic, I saw a familiar face. Except this time, he wasn't laid down in front of me, but sitting upright smiling at his wife. Of course, he had no idea who I was but I was thrilled to know he fought his way through the surgery and had no complications. I stood in the back as my cardiologist mentor assessed Mark's health and I smiled down at my little notebook journal knowing I was a very small observer in this wonderful gift.

After the organ transplant remembrance ceremony, I had only known the sorrow that the donor's family felt when their loved one passed away. Watching Mark's surgery let me witness the other side of the organ transplantation field - the hope and life you can give with a new heart.





Chapter 3 - Liver

I hope everyone who receives a second chance at life finds the gold underneath their rainbow.

Date: February 15, 2023
Location: Zoom





After a full summer of the intense emotions of patients at stages prior to their transplantation, I had little knowledge of what happens years down the line. In fact, I never even considered what would happen to this patient over 15 years. Even after seeing Mark after his surgery, I never processed what life must be like for him. At the Miami Transplant Institute, I was in a tunnel, only aware of the yearning for new life, not knowledgeable to what new life really meant to the survivors. Robert Cheung, a funny, vivacious 78 year old man, taught me what the gift of transplant really meant.

Robert is an avid athlete, immersing himself in the joy of pushing himself physically and mentally. From skiing to tennis to golf, he's widely talented and enjoys being outside exercising amongst friends. In fact, it was at the golf course where he received his first organ



transplant call. He prepared himself for surgery, pulling himself together, only to find out at 5am that the liver wasn't healthy to be transplanted. But, this didn't discourage him. Two months later, he got another offer, once again while playing golf. "That's my big thing, talking with the boys" he said fondly as he explained friendship on the golf course.

That night he had a great dinner, eating a lot of things he wasn't supposed to eat. As he went into surgery, he was thinking about his grandson who was just born. He knew what he was fighting for and I admire that so much. Life not just for himself, but for his entire family. This field has let me see so many brave souls, fighting for everyone in their world, which pushes me to keep fighting in my own life. He woke up the next morning ready to continue fighting. They told him in about a week that he was a star student and he could leave the hospital.



Turns out all that golf and tennis was crucial in his recovery!

Some people might think that once you get your new organ, that's it. They're set for life. But, Robert told me all about the rigorous schedule people are on to stay healthy. You have to change your whole life to care for this new gift. He moved to a two room apartment near Stanford to go back everyday for a checkup, then every other day, then every week, etc until it eventually became every six months. Fast forward to the present day, Robert has lived a full life. He traveled around the world to places in Europe, Austria, England, and Canada. I asked him if he enjoys traveling and he laughingly said "Traveling is my wife's idea. I just carry my wife's suitcases." At the end of this year, Robert plans to go on a cruise to Ireland. I hope he and everyone who receives a second chance at life finds the gold underneath their rainbow.

