By Russ Pankonin, The Imperial Republican Co-Publisher

In 1984, two-year-old Matthew Bemis of Rising City wandered away from a family barbecue and fell into a lake. Despite efforts to save him, Matthew was declared brain dead by doctors.

Still in the grips of grief from losing their son, his parents made the decision to donate Matthew's organs. The recovery of his liver for transplant was the first ever in Nebraska.

At the same time in Tucson, Ariz., a one-year-old girl named Lily was fighting for her life. She was suffering from a benign liver tumor that was squeezing the life out of her.

Fluid had built up in her body and she was no longer able to breathe on her own. Her tumor-filled liver accounted for 12 of Lily's 25 pounds.

Through the generosity of Matthew's parents, Milt and Janis, Lily got the life-saving organ her parents had prayed for.

Today, Lily is a healthy young woman who has graduated from college. And on the 24th anniversary of her transplant, she got married.

About a year after the transplant, the two families met. Over the years, the families have stayed in contact and remained close.

This past August, the Bemis family traveled to New York to be part of the wedding and the special event in Lily's life. While it was a bittersweet moment for the Bemis family, they were happy to see the memory of their son extended through the life of Lily.

What a story!

Today, there are more than 100,500 people in the U.S. awaiting an organ transplant, with a new name added to the list every 11 minutes. But every day, 20 people die while awaiting a life-saving organ transplant.

How can you help? You can make a difference by signing up to become an organ donor, and signing up is easy to do.

You can consent to become a donor when applying for or renewing your driver's license. You can sign a donor card and carry it with you. Or, you can sign up online at the Nebraska Donor Registry at www.nedonation.org.

Signing a donor card means your decision will be honored without any additional family consent. However, it's wise to tell your family so they can understand and support your decision.

Through organ and tissue donation, we have the potential to save eight lives and enhance the lives of 60 others.

In death, you can give the most precious gift ever—life!