



For Immediate Release

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TRIANGLE-AREA MIRACLE ATHLETES TO COMPETE IN TRANSPLANT GAMES OF AMERICA

Three Local Heart Recipients and A Kidney Recipient Travel to Grand Rapids, MI to Compete as Team Carolinas To Inspire People To Give The Gift of Life

DURHAM, NC – As the world turns it's eyes to the upcoming London Olympics, four local men take their athletic talents and passions to Grand Rapids, MI to compete in what may be an even more challenging and inspiring sporting event, The Transplant Games of America.

The Transplant Games of America is an Olympic-style sports festival for U.S. transplant recipients and living donors. More than just an athletic event, the Transplant Games of America highlights the critical importance of organ and tissue donation, while celebrating the lives of organ donors and recipients.

Recipients such as Wake Forest resident, Brian Barndt, view the games as a way to reclaim their identity as an athlete. Brian had always been a fit, athletic man. However, at the young age of 22, he was diagnosed with a serious heart disease that put a stop to his athletic endeavors and nearly took his life. On July 25, 2005, Brian received a heart transplant and a new lease on life. Today, sports and physical fitness play an integral part in this pastor's daily life. Since his transplant, Brian has competed in swimming competitions worldwide and won gold, silver and bronze medals at the U.S. and World Transplant Games. When asked why these games are so special to him, Brian said, "My life is a gift. What I enjoy and am able to accomplish today is due to the willingness of my donor and his family to make a selfless decision in the midst of unspeakable grief". Like many of his fellow competitors, Brian sees these games as a way to celebrate how far he's come and to honor his donor and their family.

Fuquay Varina resident, Al Milek, is celebrating his six year anniversary of his life-saving heart transplant by competing in his third Transplant Games. The 2006 U.S. Transplant Games took place the weekend that Al received his heart and he vowed that day to participate in the next games. Al made true to that vow and competed in both the 2008 and 2010 Games in swimming, cycling and track events. This year, he looks forward to the swimming events but he says it's the 400 meter dash that is closest to his heart. "I look at that race as once around the track for my donor," Al said.

For Triangle-resident, Jerry Smigelski, Jr., these games are a family affair. Both Jerry and his father have undergone life-saving heart transplants and the men are both competing, though for different teams, in this year's Transplant Games. It will be Jerry's first time attending the games and he has been training daily for his events, including the 5K run, table tennis, badminton and golf. Jerry said his motivation for competing in this year's festivities is twofold: "First, it is an opportunity for many transplant recipients to come together as a big group, to share our experiences and bond. Secondly, participating in the Transplant Games is a way to show appreciation for the gift of life that was given to me. It is a way to show respect to the donor family that gave me the ultimate gift."

Rounding out Team Carolina is Durham resident, Robert Newton. After living with declining health due to Polycystic Kidney Disease for more than 15 years, Robert received his kidney transplant in 2010, just in time to be there for the birth of his first daughter, Eliza. For Robert these games feel a bit like turning back the clock. "At the age of 20, I found out I had PKD and it was a real downer because I was in the best shape of my life at that point. I was playing community college football and immediately had to quit due to my health," said Robert. Though he tried to continue exercising in the years after his diagnosis, as his health declined so did his ability to keep up athletically. Since his transplant, the athletic Robert has returned to the forefront. In preparation for the games, he recently raced in the North Carolina State Championship, a time trial bike race, to gauge his improvement since his transplant. "I could have never finished in the time that I did when I was on dialysis," he said. Robert is competing to show the world and himself just how far he has come since his transplant.

Though Team Carolina is small, these four men share a determination to show their support for each other and their appreciation and gratitude to their donors and their donors' families. They also want to bring attention to the huge impact a person can make by registering as an organ and tissue donor. Organ and tissue donations save and heal hundreds of thousands of lives each year in the U.S. alone. Today, more than 115,000 candidates are on the national organ transplant waiting list. While donation rates nationwide are at all-time historic highs, due to the rarity of circumstances where organ donation is possible, only about 28,000 organs are transplanted each year. As a result, 18 patients die each day for lack of a donor, making every single donation opportunity precious.

The West Michigan Sports Commission is the primary organizer of the 2012 Transplant Games of America. Transplant recipients will compete in a variety of events, from swimming to golf, badminton to track and field. For more information on the Transplant Games of America 2012, visit www.TransplantGamesofAmerica.Org.

About Carolina Donor Services Carolina Donor Services is the federally-designated, non-profit organ and tissue donation organization serving 7 million people in 78 counties of North Carolina and Danville, Virginia. Carolina Donor Services maximizes the passing of the heroic gift of life from one human being to another through organ and tissue donation. In North Carolina, over 3,700 people are currently waiting for an organ transplant, and nationally, over 112,000 people are on the organ waiting list. For more information, visit www.carolinadonorservices.org; call 1-800-200-2672 or write 3621 Lyckan Parkway, Durham, NC 27707.

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