

'It takes away my hurt'

## Tragedy joins pair at the heart

### Mom whose daughter died visits recipient of life-saving transplant

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Danielle Martinez was 28 years old. She was a live-in nanny with a friend, taking care of two small children. She had a son of her own, Armando, 10.

One night in July 2005, Martinez had a grand mal seizure. She woke up, confused and disoriented, and headed for the bathroom. She lost her balance. She fell. She hit her neck and had a monumental stroke. Three days later, on July 13, seven days before her birthday, Martinez died.

But when Martinez's life ended, the lives of several other people resumed at a brisker pace because she was an organ donor. Her liver went to one person, her kidneys to two different people, her spleen to someone else and finally her heart made the trip across the state from Tacoma to the chest of Cindy Scinto, in Spokane.

On Friday, Martinez's mother, Charlotte Cano, 56, got to hear her daughter's heart beat again when she flew to Spokane from her home in Shelton, Wash., to meet Scinto for the first time.

The two embraced at a Friday-busy airport.

"I just can't believe it's you – oh, I just can't believe it," Scinto said, through tears and smiles.

Cano pulled out pictures of Martinez, smiling for the camera in her early years of elementary school.

"Here she is – look at this," Cano said. "I just can't believe it, I can't believe it."

Scinto, 47, had brought a bright red stethoscope so Cano wouldn't have to wait one more minute to hear her daughter's heart, but the two women found it too noisy at the airport.

Over lunch at Cyrus O'Leary's the women shared their stories.

"I kind of feel like you are my mom," Scinto said, looking at Cano, keeping a hand protectively over her heart.

"This may be an odd thing to say," Cano responded, "but to see you and hug you is a healing for me. It takes away my hurt."

And then the Kleenexes came out again, as Scinto's husband, John, watched.



Heart transplant recipient Cindy Scinto, left, listens to Charlotte Cano talk about her daughter Danielle Martinez, whose heart was donated to Scinto. Cano is from Shelton, Wash., and flew to Spokane to meet Scinto on Friday. The Spokesman-Review (Jesse Tinsley The Spokesman-Review )

#### Fast facts

- One person can save or enhance the lives of more than 50 people through organ donation. Among the organs and tissues harvested: heart, lungs, liver and specific liver cells, kidneys, pancreas, small intestine, corneas and whole eyes, bones, soft tissues, heart valves, veins and arteries, pancreatic islet cells, lymph nodes, spleen and blood.
- No one is too old, too young or too ill to be considered a donor of some type of organ or tissue.
- A patient must be declared dead by a doctor not involved in transplantation

Back in 2005, there wasn't much for either of them to be happy about: Cano had lost her only daughter, and Scinto's heart was ready to quit.

"I'd had so many near-fatal heart attacks, they stopped counting at the hospital," Scinto said. "I'd call one of my friends and say, 'I'm having another heart attack, but don't pick me up until 2; I need to clean the house a bit and pay my bills.' "

On April 28, 2005, things were a little different. Scinto found herself on the floor at her house, paralyzed by pain and fear after another heart attack. She managed to call 911 before she slid down the stairs to unlock the front door; she didn't want the paramedics to break it down to get to her.

"I think they lost me in the ambulance on the way in," she said. And at Sacred Heart Medical Center, she died in the emergency room.

"It happened twice. The second time I did have one of those out-of-body experiences people talk about," Scinto said. "I never thought much of that, but there I was, hovering in the hospital room, and I could see and hear everything.

"But I wasn't scared. I could feel the white light behind me and I heard God speak to me, saying it wasn't my time to die."

One more time, doctors and nurses brought Scinto back to life.

Dr. Timothy Icenogle, a transplant surgeon at Sacred Heart, told Scinto she needed a new heart, but that it most likely would take between nine months and a year before a suitable match would become available.

Scinto signed up on the donor waiting list on May 2, 2005.

She returned to Sacred Heart on July 13 as her tired heart once again struggled. She talked to Icenogle – not much could be done without a donor heart.

"At the time I could pretty much have laughed at a joke, and that would have killed me," Scinto said.

Prepared for a long wait, Scinto was surprised when Icenogle returned to her hospital room the next morning.

"He asked me to sign the dotted line, and I said, 'What for?' " Scinto said. "And he looked at me and said, 'Don't you want a new heart?' "

She'd only spent 72 days on the waiting list.

Icenogle left for Tacoma, where Martinez had just died.

Cano said Icenogle had to repair Martinez's heart, which was badly damaged both from the seizures and the massive stroke, before it could be harvested for Scinto. The transplant on July 14, 2005, was textbook perfect.

"There's that moment, when the new heart is in and they connect the blood flow and they usually have to use the electrodes to get it to start beating," Scinto said. "In my case they didn't have to do that. As soon as Danielle's heart was in and my blood started flowing, the heart began to beat on its own."

That, said Cano, was just another indication that it had been the right thing to do.

before organ donation is accepted.

- More than 1,200 people in the Northwest and 90,000 people nationwide are waiting for organ transplants. Every day, 18 Americans die while waiting for a transplant.

- In 2005 – the latest year for which numbers are available – Lifecenter Northwest Organ Donation Network worked with 154 organ donors, helping 452 people.

*How to designate that you want to be an organ donor:* Start by signing up with the Department of Motor Vehicles, getting that little heart on your next driver's license.

You should also make your intentions clear in your will or living will, and to family and friends.

Get more information from Lifecenter Northwest at [www.livinglegacyregistry.org](http://www.livinglegacyregistry.org), or call (877) 275-5269.

*Source: Northwest Lifecenter and the Living Legacy Registry*

"It's like Danielle was her angel and now Cindy gets to live on," Cano said. "Looking at you I really feel Danielle had a purpose on this Earth."

Cano and her daughter had talked freely about becoming organ donors. So even in her deepest despair, Cano was absolutely certain of her daughter's wishes.

"I have some medical issues and I talked to Danielle about being a donor," Cano said. "We both agreed we didn't want to be kept alive by machines. She didn't want to be 'a vegetable' she said."

It was two years after the transplant before Scinto and Cano talked. Scinto had to undergo chemotherapy for nine months to get rid of a virus called CMV that came with the heart. And Cano was "in space with grief" the first year after Martinez died.

Not every recipient wants to meet a donor's family, and not every donor family wants to meet an organ recipient. But when Scinto was feeling better, she took a chance, sending a letter through Lifecenter Northwest and its Living Legacy Foundation, which registers donors in the Northwest. The agency keeps names confidential until all parties are ready to talk.

Cano was overwhelmed when she received the letter.

"I still read it once a month – it still makes me cry," Cano said.

After a second letter, Scinto stopped writing because she didn't want to put pressure on the donor's family.

Then, in December, Lifecenter Northwest got in touch with Scinto. "They told me Danielle's mom had just called" and wanted to make contact.

E-mails were exchanged and Cano made a New Year's resolution to call Scinto. She dialed the number a few times, but couldn't get herself to press the 'call' button until this Jan. 4.

They both say almost exactly the same thing about that first phone conversation: "We laughed. We cried. She was someone I could talk to."

As the sun poked through snow clouds early Friday afternoon, they were still laughing and crying and talking, busy making plans for Scinto to make a trip to Shelton.

"This is the first month I feel like I'm not deadly ill," Scinto said. "I'm unsure if I'll live past five years." But as of this July, it will be three years since she received Danielle Martinez's heart, and Scinto feels it's only getting stronger.

"So far, things are looking good."