

“My husband was a great guy,” says Jeanne Lombardo. “He was a jokester. He loved doing magic tricks and card tricks, and he liked to bowl and golf. He was always the life of the party.”

Jeanne and Ronald were married in their early 20s, in 1965. They had three children – a daughter, Karen, and two sons, Steven and David. Ron ran his own accounting firm, and Jeanne was a stay-at-home mom. When the children reached their early teens, she went back to work as secretary to a vice president at one of Hartford large insurance companies. Life was good.

When Ron was 49, tragedy struck. He drove a motorcycle down the street to talk to a neighbor about going golfing the next day. As he was heading back home, he skidded on sand in the street, and hit the gas instead of the brakes. He hit a tree, suffering a traumatic head injury. He wasn’t wearing a helmet.

Ron survived, “but he was never the same after that,” said Jeanne. Her outgoing husband no longer wanted to take part in his favorite activities; he just wanted to stay home and sit in his favorite chair. For the next nine years, he led a very sedentary life. In February 2002, he suffered a massive heart attack and passed away. “So I really lost him twice.”

In the hospital, Jeanne remembered Ron telling her years before that he wanted to be an organ donor, and had put it on his license. She wanted to honor his wishes. While Ron couldn’t be an organ donor because he had a cardiac death, “he was able to donate tissues, bones, heart valves and the corneas of his eyes,” she said. “I was disappointed that it couldn’t be a heart, kidney or liver, but because of Ron’s donation, two people were

able to see to see again, and a lot of other people were helped.”

Prior to his death, when she talked to Ron about organ donation, “I would say, ‘You can be a donor, but I’m not. I didn’t know enough about it and how important it is to be a donor.’” The experience “changed my whole outlook on it and it changed my kids’ outlook on it, because I don’t think they knew much about it before, either.”

Now Jeanne and all three of her grown children are registered as donors, and Jeanne is an active volunteer with LifeChoice. She sits on the Donor Family Advisory Council, helps to send out letters, and crochets “heart shawls” to give to donor families. She also attends LifeChoice events, greeting the families as they come in and seating them at tables. “Whatever they need us to do, my friends and I do it.”

Jeanne has made many friends through LifeChoice and has gained a new perspective of the huge impact that organ and tissue donation has on other people’s lives. “I would definitely encourage people to become donors,” she said. “It’s a wonderful thing. When you meet all the people who have received organs, it’s just amazing. They lead full lives.”

Other types of donations – tissues and corneas, for example – can also dramatically improve the quality of someone’s life. Jeanne used to tell people that Ron was “only” able to donate his corneas, bones and other tissues, not organs. “At first, I didn’t think that was as important,” she said. But talking to other people soon changed her mind. “We’ve met a few people who had received corneas, and they spoke so highly of their donors. I’ve come to realize that every donation is an incredibly important one to the person who receives it.”