

SARAH

RECIPIENT OF: JUVENILE CARTILAGE ALLOGRAFT



TISSUE BANK EMPLOYEE REFLECTS ON SECOND CHANCE AT HEALTHY LIFE THANKS TO THE GIFT OF DONATION

It was the holidays in 2005 and Sarah was a young professional excited about her new job in the finance department of a large Denver company. Fun-loving and outgoing, Sarah was happy to offer up her talents for the playful “Stupid Human Tricks” competition at the company’s annual year-end party.

Sarah’s trick was a squirm-inducing move she’d been doing since she was a little girl: rising up on her tip toes, she would rotate her feet until her toes were pointing straight behind her body, with her legs still together. But the trick didn’t go smoothly this time.

“My ankle popped; I thought I broke it,” Sarah said. “The pain was so bad. It was horrible.”

During an initial trip to the doctor, Sarah’s injury was misdiagnosed as a sprain. She went home hoping it would heal on its own. For the next several years Sarah tried to deal with the pain, but her ankle was never the same. The injury began to take a serious toll on her active lifestyle: she could no longer do the things she loved, including skiing and running. She would push herself to play team sports like kickball, but be miserable from the pain for days afterwards.

An eventual trip to an ankle specialist revealed what Sarah already had a suspicion of: her injury was much more serious than a sprain. In fact, the peroneal tendon on the outside of her foot was torn,

and worse, a large portion of the cartilage on her ankle joint had torn off. Although her tendon was repaired with a surgery, initial attempts to heal the joint were unsuccessful. Sarah had lost too much cartilage, a tissue the body is incapable of reproducing.



Sarah’s doctor suggested treatment with an autograft, whereby bone and cartilage from her own knee would be transplanted into the injured ankle. As luck would have it, by now Sarah was working for one of the nation’s premier tissue banks, AlloSource. Here she had become aware of the tissue transplantation process. Sarah knew that although frequently used to treat injuries, autografts could lead to other complications: in her case the potential for infection in her healthy knee, a slower recovery from two surgeries and more.

Sarah urged her doctor to consider an allograft transplant, a gift of life from a deceased donor. The decision was made to use one of the newer allografts available thanks to new science: juvenile cartilage.



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These grafts, bravely donated by the families of donors just one month to 12 years old, had been found to stimulate new cartilage growth when implanted with stem cells.

Following her tissue transplant, Sarah's results have been miraculous. After a final surgery in December 2010, her doctors found that cartilage is indeed regenerating in Sarah's ankle.

"It's fascinating to see this cartilage re-growing," Sarah said. And she is able to feel the benefits already.

"I can ski again and it doesn't hurt. I've started to wear high heels again; I haven't worn high heels for years! It feels really good."

Her work at a tissue bank has heightened Sarah's respect for her second chance at a healthy life:

"I have had the opportunity to see it from the perspective that everyone should see it from; I have interacted with donor families and really comprehend that this is a gift of life that somebody else gave to me because they lost their own."

Sarah also reports a stronger kinship with her colleagues at AlloSource, who work 24/7 to process donated human tissue into allografts used for a host of surgical applications around the country.

"Processing these allografts is tedious and includes a lot of hard work. I've been able to thank the techs I work with for what they do every day."
