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Gov. Gianforte Honors Young Organ Donor During National Donate Life Month

MISSOULA, Mont. (April 12, 2022) — When Charles Birtwistle, an aspiring doctor, tragically lost his life at the age of 32, his family knew his wishes. Charles had been a registered organ donor from the time he could put it on his driver's license. What they didn't know was that Charles' selfless decision would also change their lives for the better.

The recipient of Charles' kidney and pancreas, a man in his fifties named Duane Schleitweiler responded to a letter from Charles' mom, Lisa Robertson, and sister, Molly Birtwistle. Thanks to Charles' gifts, Duane was spared hours of daily dialysis and cured of type 1 diabetes, which had plagued him since the age of 18. Lisa and Molly spent three days with Duane and his family last summer. They couldn't deny the immediate attachment. They're family now.

Charles is one of 46 Montana organ donors — and their family members — who will be honored by Gov. Greg Gianforte in a virtual ceremony April 28 co-hosted by LifeCenter Northwest. Each family member will receive a Gift of Life Award certificate signed by the governor.

"Donate Life Month offers us a chance to reflect on the importance of offering hope to those in need, and to pay tribute to our donor families, organ and tissue donors, and their recipients," said Santokh Gill, president and CEO of LifeCenter Northwest. "Our work continues, in partnership with hospitals and families across our region, to serve patients in need."

Charles was a natural comedian and an impressive athlete. While growing up, he could "drive his mom up a wall," but he had a true gift for lighting up a room and making people feel welcome. You couldn't help but smile when you were in his presence. He was magnetic.

As for Lisa, she said knowing one of her son's recipients has recreated a sense of fullness.

"Charles, in actuality, is still alive," she shared. "As a mother, this brings up very protective feelings."

The relationship that both Molly and Lisa share with Duane has made a huge difference in accepting the loss of their beloved brother and son. They know Charles would have liked Duane, too. This summer, Duane will visit them for a family "challenge" — a hike up Mount Sentinel on Charles' favorite trail!

You can honor organ donors like Charles by registering as an organ, eye, and tissue donor at www.lcnw.org and sharing this decision with your family.

About LifeCenter Northwest

LifeCenter Northwest is the federally-designated organ procurement organization serving Alaska, Montana, northern Idaho and Washington — the largest geographic donation service area in the United States. For more information, or to register to be an organ, eye, and tissue donor, please visit www.lcnw.org.

About National Donate Life Month

National Donate Life Month was established by Donate Life America and its partnering organizations in 2003. Celebrated in April each year, National Donate Life Month features an entire month of local, regional and national activities to help encourage Americans to register as organ, eye, and tissue donors and to celebrate those who have saved lives through the gift of donation.