

An Organ Donor Campaign Targets Jews

By SUSAN KONIG

WHEN she was a youngster, a speaker visited Michelle Levine's elementary school and told her class about organ donation. But at home, she was told that becoming a donor was against her Jewish faith.

The issue remained moot for her until a year and a half ago when, during a conversation with her husband, Leonard Troupp — who happens to be a rabbi at Temple Beth David, a Reform synagogue in Commack — she learned that Jewish thinking on the issue was not unanimous.

"In Judaism there's a belief that, just as we must care for our bodies in life, they shouldn't be desecrated after death," Rabbi Troupp said. "That's a mitzvah, a part of our commandment system. But there are other mitzvahs which get balanced against one another. There is pikuach nefesh, which in Hebrew means 'the saving of a life.' And that takes precedence over virtually every other mitzvah."

Last March, Rabbi Troupp surveyed his congregation of 750 families and found that "everyone surveyed believed organ donation was against our religion."

So last May, the rabbi explained his understanding of the issue to his congregation, and he invited members to sign up as organ donors. Computers were placed in the temple so that congregants could register online. Sixty people signed up that day.

The Troupps then approached Elaine Berg, president of the New York Organ Donor Network — a Manhattan-based nonprofit group that procures organs and tissues for transplant and educates people about donation — with the idea of replicating what they had done at religious institutions throughout the state. "We were so taken with the Troupps' enthusiasm and commitment, we wanted to do anything we could to support them," Ms. Berg said.

Last fall, the Troupps approached houses of worship of every faith in and around Huntington, their hometown. Fifteen agreed to join them. They named the project the Gift of Life and organized a speakers' bureau of clergy, medical experts, donor recipients and donor family members, as well as a 21-panel photo-and-story exhibit of lives saved by organ donation.

The exhibits are intended to be dis-



Maxine Hicks for The New York Times

Rabbi Leonard Troupp and his wife, Michelle Levine-Troupp, have developed an organ donation program at Temple Beth David in Commack.

played for at least four weeks, with volunteers on hand to offer additional information and help people register. The exhibits began appearing in Huntington-area houses of worship in December, with more joining the program in January.

"If we can show it's successful among New York's different geographic and demographic areas, and we believe it will be, we'll seek funding to replicate this nationally," Ms. Berg said.

Ms. Levine-Troupp said she encountered no resistance among Christian pastors, though the local Catholic churches put off their participation in the program until next winter "because their holiday schedules were already booked."

Her husband said that while the Christian groups didn't have religious objections, "there were plenty of underlying fears that stood in people's way which we wanted to address."

The Huntington area's Conservative Jewish synagogues also agreed to participate. But resistance remains among Orthodox Jewish congregations.

"Many Jews believe you need your organs after death so that resurrection can occur," said Robby Berman,

whose Manhattan-based Halachik Organ Donor Society focuses on an Orthodox Jewish audience. "But there is no source in Jewish literature to support this. In the ground, organs disintegrate anyway."

Mr. Berman said that in theory, Orthodox rabbis are not opposed to organ donation. "They are, however, split in terms of the concept of when death begins," he continued. "Some rabbis consider a person who is brain stem-dead to be dead, and would thereby condone organ donation. Others feel that, even after brain-stem death, if the person's heart continues to beat because he is on a respirator, he is still alive, and you cannot kill him in order to harvest organs."

J. David Bleich, an Orthodox rabbi and professor at Cardozo Law School in New York, said that "according to Jewish law, declaration of death requires a total cessation of neurological, cardiac and respiratory function." But he said that at the point of brain death as defined in most hospitals, "the brain isn't truly dead. The hypothalamus is still working, the brain is regulating body temperature, and the heart is still beating."

"We have no issue with donating organs to save a life, provided the in-

dividual meets the criteria of death," Rabbi Bleich said. "But, at that point, with the exception of the kidneys, the organs aren't fit for donation. Our objection is pronouncing a patient dead in order to get organs."

When the exhibit ran at Rabbi Troupp's temple in December, an additional 100 congregants signed up. "I drove to the temple saying, 'I'll never do this,' and 'it's against my religion,'" said Diane Fero, a Brooklyn resident and a member of Rabbi Troupp's congregation. "But, when I got there, everything just clicked. Donation is a mitzvah. I've been lucky in my life, and here was an incredible way to give back. So, I registered."

"When I told my friends, most were shocked," she continued. "Some still insist I can't be buried in a Jewish cemetery, which is absolutely untrue. Unfortunately, there's a lot of misconception, and not everyone has the Troupps to talk to."

Ms. Berg said that "organ donation will not disfigure the donor and subsequently prevent an open-casket viewing after his or her death." Another fear that prevents people from becoming donors, Ms. Levine-Troupp said, is a widely held belief that "if an organ donor gets seriously ill, the doctor will not do everything possible to his save his life."

"A patient must be on a respirator and declared brain dead before donation can even be considered," Ms. Berg said. "And the declaration must be made by more than one doctor. There are checks and balances, and it takes time. And, no one, including doctors, knows who is on a waiting list."

When the Old First Presbyterian Church of Huntington ran its exhibit in December, 75 congregants registered, said the Rev. Chuck Carey, its pastor. He attributed much of the response to the involvement of Candace Moose of Huntington, a member of his congregation who received a heart transplant in October 2001. "My congregation knows first-hand the importance of donation," she said. "They saw how my life was saved."

"While we have no religious restrictions about donation," Mr. Carey said, "there are many fears that surround death and make people reluctant. Becoming a donor usually requires sitting down with your family and talking about these things, which people aren't so eager to do. The first step is to start a dialogue. But it's a sensitive issue that will take time." ■