

Kim Hoffman's father, John Wilk, Jr., was a career military man. He'd retired from the U.S. Army. Ten years ago, on Veteran's Day, he was having breakfast with his wife, Patricia, when he collapsed at the table.

"My mom called and said, 'Something's wrong with dad. He can't speak. I live less than a mile from my parents' house, so I rushed right over,'" recalled Kim. "He'd had a massive stroke."

John was rushed to hospital, where he had immediate surgery. "They thought they had caught the clot in his brain, and put him into a medically induced coma. We came back the next morning and [found out] that he'd had eight more strokes overnight and was 99 percent brain dead. My father was declared dead about 7 o'clock that night." John had just turned 65 years old.

"There were two nurses there who were wonderful," Kim said. "They asked us if we had ever considered organ and tissue donation. As agonizing as every other decision was, when they asked us that, there was this instant sense of peace and calm. Everyone – I have one brother, one sister and my mom – in harmony, we all said yes, without even looking at each other. It brought some level of peace in the middle of something that was so unexpected."

John's corneas, tissues and bones were donated. "We all say to this day, 'I really believe my father lives on in somebody else,' and LifeChoice was exceptional, especially during the first two years. They let us know as our donations were placed with recipients," said Kim. "I guess you never really accept a death, but it just makes it okay to know that someone else is benefiting – you don't feel that he's ever really gone."

Kim said her family knows the gender and age of the recipients of her father's donations, but not their identity. "I would love to know the circumstances surrounding the recipients and what their needs were. We haven't tried to get in contact them, but I really do hope that we have the chance. I would love to meet those people and their families, and know what life is like for them," she said.

John and Patricia were married in 1966 and were still extremely close after 38 years of marriage. "If there ever were two people who were truly soul mates, it was my parents. My dad was a very tall guy and had a very commanding presence. My father was like a gentle giant with my mom. He was 6'5"; my mom is 5'6". She weighs about 100 pounds – he was 200-plus pounds. It was like a giant teddy bear picking up the little bird," she said fondly. "They were always two happy people." John retired in 1994. "Once he retired, it was like a new life for my parents. They loved to travel, and they had the opportunity to do that."

The fall of 2004 was very traumatic for the family. Within weeks, Kim's brother-in-law, mother-in-law and father passed away. But the year also brought blessings. In June 2004, Kim's sister got married. "I'm so grateful she had that opportunity to have Dad walk her down the aisle, and he was able to see all of his children married." A few weeks before his death, the family went to a game at Yankee Stadium. John was a die-hard Yankees fan.

Kim continues to be a strong advocate for organ and tissue donation. "I hope that more people sign up to do organ and tissue donation," she said. "It's amazing to see how grateful [recipients] are. I think it's like having another whole family that you belong to – people who have either have donated or received."