Belen Bell
Senior Community Health Program Representative
Health System: Lifesharing

Belen Bell loves her job and her patients’ families love her. Considering what she does, this might surprise many people because Belen enters her families’ worlds inarguably on the worst day of their lives. The day their loved one has died under often tragic, unexpected circumstances.

Then Belen does what few of us ever could. With great compassion, she asks the grieving family to donate their loved one’s organ and tissues. To think of others when their own world has crumbled. They say ‘yes’ in amazing numbers because of Belen. She has helped their recovery start and has transformed the world for a number of people on the national organ waiting list who otherwise might have died.

To be a Family Support Specialist for an organ and tissue recovery organization is difficult at best. But Belen has found her calling. She is an exemplary member of our team who always looks for ways to help. Ways to save more lives. To educate hospital staff so they pick up the phone and make a timely referral. To forge partnerships within our community. To help her colleagues. Belen even supports families who decline donation. As an end-of-life expert, she feels it is the right thing to do. That’s Belen.

Nine years ago when Belen arrived at Lifesharing, donor families received a thank you letter. Period. She changed all that. Lifesharing’s donor families now receive quarterly letters from Family Services. These special notes acknowledge where the family might be in their recovery and offer resources. They also continue recognition of the precious gift their loved one gave. At the end of a two-year period, she encourages the families to volunteer with Lifesharing, which also helps in their healing.

Belen reinforces the fact we truly consider their loved one to be a hero - heroes who in their last hour gave a lifetime to others. Her innovations in support of our 600 donor families per year include:

- Presentation of a Donor Family medallion to the family while they are still at the hospital.
- Preparation of a packet of materials that goes home with the family including funeral sources.
- Family support phone calls anytime needed.
- A program that allows families to separate from their loved one with special blankets that covered them, beautiful handprints and locks of the donor’s hair.
- A poignant moment of silence in surgery before recovery begins that relays a few memories about the donor that the family wanted shared with the team.
- A gift program requested by grateful families to honor the donor in lieu of flowers. Each financial donor receives a special letter of thanks from Lifesharing’s Executive Director, which also is sent to the donor’s family. The funds go to help inspire others to register as donors.
- A semi-annual Day of Remembrance at our permanent Donor Memorial. The one-ton stone is by far our ‘largest & heaviest’ gift ever – given thanks to Belen. These memorial services are very effective and are done at one-tenth the cost of similar programs - again thanks to Belen.)

Nationally, it’s rare that a recipient ever meets their donor’s family. Belen’s support, however, has brought many families together here. She personally forwards letters from recipients’ transplant centers … and then gently calls a donor family to let them know when a letter will appear in their mailbox. Ten families over the last two years have met because of Belen. The meetings are cathartic and wonderfully moving. The list goes on and on regarding the difference Belen makes in the lives of our families. She so willingly shares the ideas with other recovery organizations, presents at multicultural conferences, participates in end of life support groups in our community, and sits side by side with our volunteers to stuff envelopes, talk, cry and laugh.

She also studies different cultures to be able to best support our families. In her ‘spare’ time, Belen speaks to our Hispanic media to dispel myths and inspire people to sign up as donors. Doing TV interviews isn’t something she enjoys at all, but Belen feels is important. (She’s good at it, too!) Recently Belen was featured in a Reader magazine cover story. She absolutely hated having her picture taken until we said she could stand in front of the donor quilts she helps families make.

When her pager goes off at 2 a.m., it’s hard to crawl out of bed. But Belen knows she’s needed. Her own family knows why she goes. And our staff and a family waiting for her appreciate her extraordinary work.