



Second Chances

Junior Angus member gains hope, new life and purpose through organ donation.

Story & photos by **Nicole Lane**, editorial intern

Working all day in the heat building fence; breaking through the ice on water troughs in the winter; and getting covered in mud, manure and more are just a few of the discomforts of living the farm life. However, having the right person by your side can make monotonous and messy chores seem less dreadful . . . even fun.

For National Junior Angus Association (NJAA) members Eric and Tyler Blythe, having a twin brother as a best friend and work partner meant ranch chores were more exciting.

Growing up on a seedstock and commercial Angus operation just outside of White City, Kan., the boys lived for summertime when they could be outside working on the ranch. They made plans to attend Kansas State University (K-State) after high school graduation, choosing fields of study useful to the farm or ranch. Tyler, dubbed the “farm mechanic,” planned to major in agricultural technology management. Eric chose animal sciences. Life, however, had other plans.

In the summer of 2014, Tyler, a once healthy showman and ranch hand had an illness no one could explain. His body was red from rashes, and he suffered from



► Twin brothers Eric (left) and Tyler Blythe are thankful to be outside working cattle together one year after Tyler’s liver transplant.

relentless itching that no ointment or cream would relieve. He couldn’t sleep, could barely eat and definitely couldn’t help during his favorite season on the farm. When he began

showing signs of jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes), a visit to the doctor’s office determined he had liver damage, but from what, they didn’t know. He returned home

#AngusKidsDonateLife

hoping things would soon improve.

Unfortunately, the opposite happened. Tyler grew sicker until he was finally diagnosed with primary sclerosing cholangitis (PSC), the only cure being a full liver transplant. While most PSC patients can live for years with the symptoms, Tyler was back in the hospital at the top of the transplant list only 15 days after being diagnosed.

While Tyler awaited a miracle at the University of Kansas (KU) Medical Center, Eric began the adventure of college without his twin by his side.

The same week his sibling started classes at K-State, Tyler learned he would be getting a new liver, becoming one of the 146 liver transplants at KU Medical Center in 2014.

"Watching Tyler have to go through this was difficult," Eric says. "As a twin, we've had the closest connection, so it was almost like me being there with him."

Symbol of hope

Having spent the entire summer indoors and a significant amount of time in the hospital, Tyler had the chance to watch several movies, one being *Superman*. Watching this movie with his family just days before his transplant, they learned that the S symbol on Superman's costume doesn't stand for Superman. Instead it is a symbol of hope from Superman's home planet.

As Tyler waited for surgery, his entire family filed into his room, each wearing a red T-shirt. On the front was the Superman symbol and the words, "Team Tyler." On the back was the National Organ Donation Registry website (www.organdonor.gov).

His family gathered around Tyler expressing their love and support, thankful for their Superman, the one who gave them hope and Tyler the gift of life. The Blythes understood that in their moment of hope, another family faced a season of mourning.

"It's hard to process how he was that close, but he was saved by someone else, someone who also saved a bunch of people," Eric says.

Tyler recalls that his family's positivity and their faith helped him stay upbeat throughout the battle.

"Tyler was the one who stayed the most positive," Eric says. "We knew everything before the doctor told him, and when the doctor told him he just looked at us and said, 'It's going to be okay,' like he knew he was going to be okay. . . . It was all him."

Now, one short year after having the transplant, Tyler is adjusting to life on immunosuppressant medication and glad to be back in the tractor and able to help with farm chores. Full of life, he bounces around

the ranch with a new perspective and a mission.

"He just can't sit down," says Eric. "He always has to be doing something, and sitting in the hospital for so long made him realize how much he loves what he does in agriculture."

Happy to finally be back doing what he loves, Tyler sees things in a new light.

"After going through something like this, you value your life and other people's lives a lot more," says Tyler, reflecting on how easily life can be lost. "It's hard to think about, but life is so precious."

Raising awareness

Hoping to help people learn more about organ donation, the Blythe family has shared their story and started raising money to increase awareness about organ donation. Tyler's mom, Debbie, writes about organ donation on her blog *Kids, Cows and Grass*. The community of White City hosted a blood drive and organ donation awareness event. They brought in representatives from the National Organ Donor Registry to help people sign up to become organ donors.

"What people don't realize is that if it's on your license, your family can still overturn it," Tyler says. "The only way to override it is to talk to your family about it and register

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through organdonation.gov; even family can't contradict that."

"Team Tyler" did not stop with that night in the hospital. The family began selling purple Team Tyler shirts to friends in an effort to raise money to support the cause. They raised more than \$2,000 to give to the Gift of Life Charity, and they hope to do more.

"The biggest part of this whole thing should be raising awareness," Tyler says. "Bring up the subject; don't just let it happen. At least once, have the conversation with your family, because if it happens, it's a really hard decision at the time. It's hard to be ready for it, and you're not going to be ready for it, but at least you have an idea of what is best."

An avid showman, Tyler was far too sick to participate in the 2014 National Junior Angus Show (NJAS). However, this year he made the trip to Tulsa to experience one of his favorite events and share his message with other NJAA members. Through the hashtag #AngusKidsDonateLife he and fellow Kansas Junior Angus members worked to share information about organ and blood donation (See "Donate Life," page 214).

Be a Superman

Anyone, regardless of age, can be an organ and tissue donor. Currently there are about 123,000 people in the United States waiting for an organ. Organ donation needs range from livers, like in Tyler's case, to hearts, kidneys, eyes, skin and more.

"It was the best gift that anyone could give," says Tyler, "but it wasn't just me they gave a gift to. When a person donates organs they can save up to eight lives and improve 105."

People with medical conditions can still become donors. Tyler keeps a note inside his wallet behind his license just in case something should happen. He knows he still wants to be able to give life the way that he has been able to receive.

"Think about it before it happens," Tyler says. "You don't want that all of a sudden just hitting you. Not that anyone wants this to happen, but it's better to be aware of all the good that can come through all of the bad."

People of all ages, races and ethnicities can donate organs and tissues to improve and save lives, but the demand is even higher for people who are minorities to donate. A greater number and diversity of donors could increase access to transplantation for everyone.

The Blythes are not just promoting organ donation. During Tyler's time in the hospital



he needed 14 units of blood to clean and replenish his healthy blood supply. Now that they have seen how impactful it can be, the entire family has become regular blood donors and encourages friends and family to do the same.

"Before Tyler's incident I'd probably only donated blood once or twice, but since then I donate as much as possible because now I know what it goes to and how helpful it is to other families and individuals," says Eric.

Thanking a superhero

One year after receiving the new liver, Tyler jumps into a blue tractor early Saturday morning ready to feed cattle. While some kids may complain about farm chores, Tyler has a new appreciation for time in the barn and days spent working cattle and building fence.

"Being in the hospital for so long, you miss it. You miss being outside, you miss seeing the cattle, you miss your family so much," says Tyler.

Tyler intends to work to stay healthy, raise awareness and fulfill his passion as a cattle producer so that his life may be a testament to the gift that their loved one gave.

"This is my way of carrying on their life," he says. "That is something I am going to hold onto forever."

Unable to contact the family, the Blythes know little about their Superman, only that the person was young and local. Someday, they hope to be able to get in touch with the family of the person who gave the greatest gift of all. In the meantime, they continue to pray for the comfort of the family whose loved one was lost.

To the family Eric would say, "Thank you. Not only did you save my brother, but you saved multiple other lives. I know it's difficult, but your loved one will always survive within my brother and the others that they helped."

