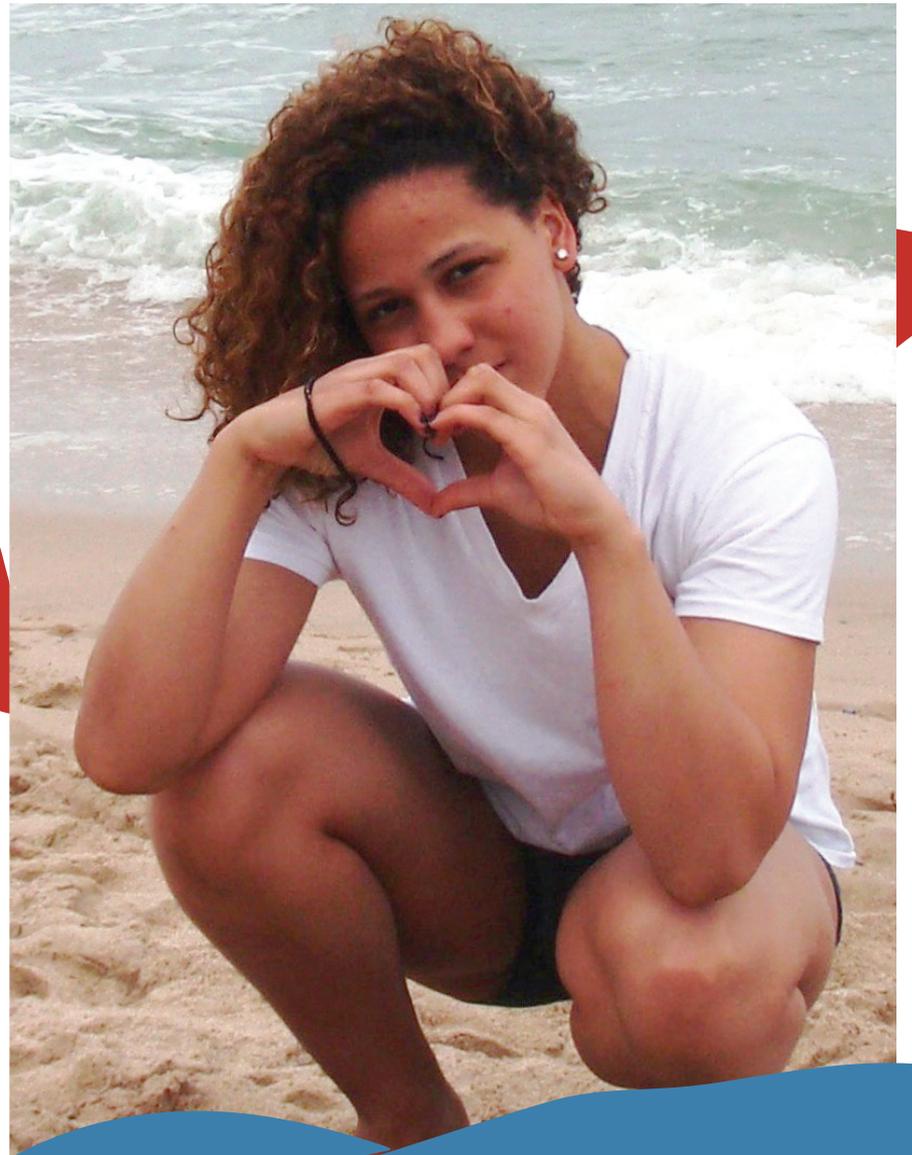


You know her as the MU swimmer from ESPN's January "Outside The Lines" report, which told the story of her 2011 suicide. The media has linked Sasha Menu Courey inseparably to rape, mental illness and Title IX. But there's much more to her story. Her death brought two families colliding together, and her legacy lives on in Pat Healy, who received her heart.

It started in Massachusetts.

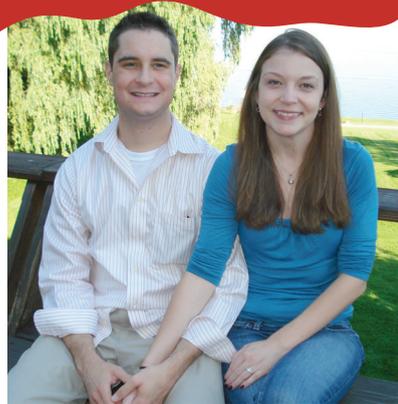


# The Girl with the Golden Heart

Story by Rebecca Dell  
Illustrations by Aaron Franco



A young Pat with his mother



Pat, with Karen, in 2011

### Fall 2005: The gene pool

Pat Healy couldn't stop coughing.

As midterms loomed, the University of Massachusetts sophomore shrugged off the pneumonia or whatever it was and pushed through his tests.

But the coughing eventually drove the Massachusetts native to seek a diagnosis. Pat, 20 at the time, told the doctor at the hospital about his family: His mom had a heart transplant when he was in second grade. She died when he was a freshman in high school. His younger brother had heart issues, too. They were swimming in the wrong end of the gene pool, Pat says.

And then Pat got his own diagnosis: heart failure. Technically, it was nonischemic dilated cardiomyopathy, but regardless of the name, his heart wasn't pumping the amount of blood that it should have been. The doctors ran tests and gave him drugs and sent him home to try to live a sort-of normal life.

### Spring 2009: The recruit

Sasha Menu Courey talked excitedly on the phone. The head swim coach from the University of Missouri had called the Toronto high school athlete, and the two stayed on the phone for an hour. That fall, Sasha left her parents and sister in Toronto and settled into a new routine in Columbia as an MU student athlete. Although an NCAA academic credit rule kept her from competing her first year, she thrived as part of the team at practices and other events.

Sasha, age 15, with her father and sister, Kayla



### February 2011: The patient

Once again, Pat was sick. He thought he had caught the flu. He was out of college by now, and his girlfriend, Karen Miele, begged him to go to the hospital. As February slid into March, she worriedly observed his friends and coworkers. Surely if he had the flu, one of them would have caught it by now. She begged him again.

They'd only been dating since January, but they'd known each other for years, and their stars had always been connected; they were born the same day, one year apart. "There really wasn't any doubt in my mind when we started dating that I wanted to marry him," says Karen, an English teacher in Massachusetts. Even though Pat hated Scrabble, he'd play with her in coffee shops. He was one of the few people she could talk to about anything.

At that point, Pat was working in constituent services for U.S. Sen. Scott Brown, R-Mass., and was slowly getting sicker and sicker. One day, his boss noticed his lips were blue — he wasn't getting enough oxygen. In late March, he went to his primary care doctor. The doctor's office took his blood pressure, saw his systolic pressure had dipped to 84, and called an ambulance. Pat's hospital visits typically lasted a few days, just long enough for doctors to regulate medications and monitor him. This time was different.

### The sisters

Kayla Menu Courey, 16 months younger than Sasha, had a falling out with her sister when they were children. Sasha dared Kayla to do a handstand on a rickety table. Kayla fell; Sasha got in trouble. Later, when the girls had to choose between their

demanding private school studies and equally strenuous athletic schedules, Kayla chose academics. Sasha chose swimming. "I guess our lives just started being really separate," Kayla says. Sasha could be happy and hyper around her friends but quiet and moody around her sister.

One year after Sasha started college at MU, Kayla moved to Halifax, Nova Scotia, to study marine biology at Dalhousie University.

Their relationship started to mend. They'd text about boys and swim meets. Kayla heard about her sister's new friends and 4.0 GPA.

To Kayla, Sasha seemed to be doing well.

### The failing heart

The heart is made up of four chambers — two ventricles and two atria — working in concert to circulate blood through the lungs and the rest of the body. The blood flows into the atria while the ventricles relax. Then the ventricles contract, strong and fast, giving the blood a powerful push out the door. The "lub-DUB" of a heartbeat is the sound of those doors, or valves, slamming shut.

Cardiomyopathy can have different effects on the heart, all preventing proper circulation. The walls of Pat's heart got thicker and less elastic, and as a result, his heart couldn't pump the blood through his lungs and body with proper efficiency. When cardiomyopathy leads to symptoms of severe heart failure and all other avenues of treatment are exhausted, the patient needs a new heart.

A heart recipient needs anti-rejection drugs for the rest of his or her life to keep the immune system from attacking the foreign heart. Even so, long-term survival for a heart transplant recipient is considered to be about 20 years past the transplant date. For Pat, that would bring him to his mid-40s.

It's a miracle to get those extra years. But it also comes at the cost of another life.



Sasha, age 19,  
and Kayla in  
Toronto

### March 2011: The darkness

Sasha was born to swim. She once wrote that her signature scent was chlorine. But that spring, several factors were keeping her out of the pool. She suffered a back injury that kept her from practice. Missouri's new head coach at the time, Greg Rhodenbaugh, asked Sasha not to come to team workouts because, he later told ESPN, she was no longer going to the counseling she had started in 2010.

So she wasn't swimming. On top of that, Sasha and her boyfriend had just ended their relationship. Noxious feelings of failure and depression bubbled back up without the routine of swimming. It wasn't the first time she'd been so low she wanted to hurt herself; she had tried to commit suicide when she was 16. Now, she phoned home to Toronto and told her parents, Lynn

## MU and Title IX

In January 2014, three years after her death, ESPN published an investigative article and video about Sasha Menu Courey. The report accused MU of mishandling her mental illness and her claim of sexual assault by a football player, and it fueled rising national awareness of assault on college campuses. An independent law firm reported in April that MU did fail to have proper Title IX policies for employees to report information about sexual assault against students. Sasha, it seems, was a victim of a broken system and several blind eyes.

In another "Outside the Lines" piece from ESPN released Aug. 21, MU was again accused of inaction involving Title IX procedures and reports of sexual assault. This time, it focused on the four counts of alleged assault — including rape and physical assault — perpetrated against several women by former football star receiver Derrick Washington before he left the school in 2010. Chancellor Bowen Loftin has since apologized for the missteps on behalf of the university.

Courey and Mike Menu, that she was checking into the hospital. "We knew what she meant, that she was suicidal," Lynn says. "We told her we were very proud of her to seek help."

Other darkness haunted Sasha, too. She reported a rape from a year earlier in her journal and to a counselor (the Columbia Police Department is still investigating). Sasha's family calls the converging circumstances a perfect storm. Without being able to swim, Sasha lost a major tool for dealing with what would be diagnosed as Borderline Personality Disorder, a mental illness that meant Sasha struggled with emotion dysregulation and impulsiveness, as well as instability in relationships and self-image.

That March, she spent 10 days in the psychiatric ward at MU. Another patient talked to her about suicide methods that might be more effective. The day after Sasha checked out, she and a roommate from the ward unsuccessfully attempted to carry out a suicide pact.

In the following weeks, Mike and Lynn searched for treatment for Sasha. "She was decided that she loved life, that she wanted to live, but she just couldn't live with that excruciating pain," Lynn says. "She needed major help." The family opted for a drug-free treatment called dialectical behavior therapy, or DBT, which teaches patients and their loved ones skills to recognize and manage emotions. An inpatient treatment in Boston was recommended to the family in April, so they headed to the East Coast.

### April 2011: The list

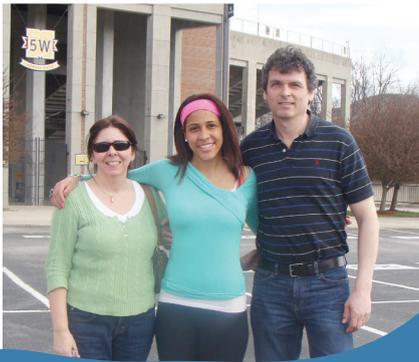
On April 8, Pat's home team, the Boston Red Sox, pulled a 9-6 win over the New York Yankees for their home opener. Pat joined the heart transplant list.

He'd never worried about dying, not really. The doctors, he figured, would always have something else they could try, some new drug or complicated procedure. He was running out of options. A surgeon implanted a small pump, called a Ventricular Assist Device, designed to bolster his diseased heart's feeble pumping. It was only a short-term solution — a bridge to transplant, people call it. Wires were left poking out through his abdomen, plugging him into a battery pack or wall outlet like an oversized electronic toy.

The pump meant his skin lost its sallow color for once, and his energy level spiked. "The doctors even asked me if that was his normal behavior, because he had so much energy, and he was so hyper they were worried he might be manic-depressive," Karen says. "And I was like, 'No, he's just excited because he's never had this much energy before.'" It looked like he could go home until a heart became available.

As a nurse prepped Pat to leave the hospital, she noticed the numbers for the pump were wrong. The nurse pressed reset, left, came back — still wrong. Doctors worried about a clot, then low blood cell counts. "(The pump) was shredding his red blood cells," Karen says. She imagined a tiny turbine slashing the hapless red discs passing through his heart. In addition,

Pat Healy had never worried about dying, not really. The doctors, he figured, would always have something else they could try. But his name on the transplant list meant he was running out of options.



Sasha and her parents at MU in 2011

“She was decided that she loved life, that she wanted to live, but she just couldn’t live with that excruciating pain.”

— Lynn Courey, Sasha’s mom

a staph infection attacked the implant site. Pat was resigned to hobble along, indefinitely lodged at the hospital and attached to his IV drip.

Later, there was a false alarm that a heart was available, a crest of anticipation quickly broken. Pat was wound tight with stress. Karen, of course, wanted a heart for him as desperately as anyone. But that desire was twined with sadness. She knew getting a heart for Pat meant someone else would have to die.

### June 2011: The final spiral

In a suburb across Boston, half an hour from Pat’s hospital, Sasha settled in at a residential treatment facility for young women with self-damaging and impulsive behaviors.

Although improvement was slow, as weeks passed, the therapy seemed to be working for Sasha. Her parents learned skills to help create an environment where she could best regulate her emotions. “DBT treatment was like water, like a vital resource to live for her,” Mike says, citing his daughter’s journal entries. Sasha graduated to the step-down program and was allowed to roam within the facility on her own.

But the price tag for Sasha’s treatment at the facility, McLean 3East, rang up at \$44,000 every 28 days. After two months, Lynn says she and Mike were told their daughter needed six more months of the intensive therapy. May wore into June. The family searched for more affordable options.

In mid-June, Mike and Lynn went to Boston for a week with the intention of bringing Sasha back home. In Toronto, she’d get outpatient care with a new therapist. But Sasha wasn’t ready. “She knew very well that there was nothing like McLean here (in Toronto) for her,” Lynn says. Sasha, her mother says, became drained of feelings. She started signaling that she didn’t plan on ever going back to Toronto. She planned future dinners for Mike and Lynn, leaving herself out entirely. Sasha reminded her mom to bring home the pillow and pocket money she had at the facility. She refused extra

bags to pack her things in. “Sasha was always giving hints and tips of what she was going to do, but without really telling you,” Lynn says. Her daughter was acting too happy. Lynn’s dread grew. “You’re trying to tell yourself well, maybe I’m overreacting,” she says.

There was another sign. When Mike and Lynn had picked Sasha up from the MU hospital earlier that spring — the last time she’d tried to kill herself — Sasha had given Mike a campus tour. She wore an asymmetrical robin’s egg blue shirt, stretchy black pants and sandals. She wore that same outfit on Sunday, June 12, and suggested they walk around Harvard’s campus. “I remember seeing her come out of the 3East building, and she was dressed with that outfit, and then I remember just kind of gasping,” Mike says. Lynn says, “It was like a *déjà vu*, and a bad feeling.” She told her daughter she recognized that Sasha was mirroring her behavior from her previous suicide attempt.

“And then she looked at me, and she didn’t say anything, and she turned around,” Lynn says.

### The crash

One night later, back at McLean 3East on a Monday, Sasha ingested a bottle of Tylenol she had obtained by leaving the hospital grounds without permission. The next morning, 3East hospital staff found her in her room, still alive but suffering from the overdose.

By 8:15 a.m., her parents got the call and rushed to Mount Auburn hospital where Sasha was treated. Mike remembers her saying, “Mama, Papa, I’m sorry that I broke your trust.” Lynn remembers her saying, “I just didn’t want to live with BPD anymore. And I didn’t want to be a burden to you guys.” A tear slid from Sasha’s eye.

The ER doctor said she’d eventually be OK. She’d have no permanent damage. Relieved, her parents went back to their hotel to sleep.

But the doctor was wrong. When Lynn returned at 5 a.m. the next day, Sasha was in pain. Mike and Lynn rushed to get her sister Kayla on a flight from Halifax to

Boston. Sasha was transferred to Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center so the liver experts there could try to help her. On Wednesday night, she went into a coma. When Kayla arrived, all she could do was watch the septic shock claim her sister’s body. Sasha was declared braindead on Friday.

The doctors asked about organ donation. Mike and Lynn knew Sasha would want to help; had she lived, Sasha would have required a new liver.

“I told my parents we needed to unplug her, and we needed to salvage as many organs as we could,” Kayla says. “And what was left were her lungs and her heart. And I told my parents, I was like, ‘She’s a swimmer; she has an amazing heart and amazing lungs.’” But an infection found in her lungs meant only one organ was viable.

Her heart.

### The call

Doctors took the heart from Sasha’s chest and sent it from Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, where Sasha died, to Brigham and Women’s Hospital, where Pat and his IV pole waited. The journey was less than half a mile.

At Brigham, Pat’s doctor walked into his room and told Pat he was getting a heart. Pat jumped up and hugged him. Then he called his family and was wheeled away to the operating room.

Karen Miele was on her way to her sister’s bachelorette party, stopped at a gas station between Boston and a Connecticut casino, when her sister finally heard Karen’s cell phone ringing. “I had joked around with (Pat),” Karen says. “I said, ‘Just don’t get the transplant the day of my sister’s wedding or the day of her bachelorette party because I won’t be around.’” Karen, her sister and the other bridesmaids raced back to Boston. By the time Karen arrived at the hospital, Pat was already in surgery, receiving Sasha’s heart.

## The rebirth

Pat seemed to wake as slowly as Sasha had slipped away. Pulmonary edema, or swelling around his lungs, meant he needed a pulmonary team checking in on him and a tube down his throat. The medical team kept him sedated until the tube could come out. Three days after Pat's surgery, as Karen sat in his hospital room, she swore she felt him squeeze her hand.

The next day, Pat finally came to. He saw his primary ICU nurse, MaryKate Hegarty, a steadfast friend who would later attend Pat and Karen's wedding. She first met Pat when he was on her unit after his earlier surgery to implant the pump. Pat was a staff favorite at the hospital; laughter would ring down the hall after his jokes. "I see a lot of patients that are very feisty, which is a good sign," MaryKate says. "But I never see the feistiness with the humor. And he had a bit of both."

When he woke up, he asked MaryKate what he had missed. She told him authorities had finally caught bloody South Boston mobster James "Whitey" Bulger after a 16-year manhunt.

He asked Karen if he really got the heart. She got to tell him he did.



Pat, Karen  
and MaryKate

“She has an AMAZING story. I say ‘has’ on purpose. The word ‘had’ implies it is over, and I am proof it is far from that.”

— Pat Healy, in a letter to Sasha’s parents

### The regret

Mike and Lynn were in agony knowing Sasha was gone. They got a call telling them the transplant to the anonymous recipient had gone well. It was almost soothing, Mike says. A sliver of peace and goodness.

Still, the pain was sharp. Lynn remembers Sasha’s hints that she was planning to die. “It’s really, really sad, because it’s like, ‘Oh, she told me, not with words, but she told me with her behavior that it wasn’t possible for her to do it (make the transition back to Canada),’ and I didn’t listen,” Lynn says, teary and wistful. “Sometimes you feel guilty this way, right?”

### The recovery

Eventually, Pat was weaned from his IV fluids. For a few days after that, he still reached for the pole when he got up to walk, grasping at air. In mid-July, he left the hospital for the first time since March. He still didn’t know who his donor was.

On the way home from the hospital, Pat sat in the backseat, a heart-shaped pillow under the seat belt sash to protect his still-healing chest. He could feel the pulse in his toes for the first time. He and Karen, along with another friend, stopped at a Bertucci’s restaurant. The waitress didn’t believe he just gotten a heart transplant. He showed her his scar. He got free dessert.

### January 2012: The discovery

Less than a year after the transplant, Mike and Lynn and Pat exchanged anonymous notes through the organ bank organization.

Pat knows that if it weren’t for their generosity in their moment of crisis, he probably wouldn’t be alive. The card from Mike and Lynn followed a typical recipient-contact protocol of not including Sasha’s last name. Still, Pat Googled what he could. Sasha. Swimmer. June 18, 2011.

And he went through page after page, reading

everything he could about this girl who had saved his life, this girl who had taken her own.

A July 2011 article in the *Columbia Daily Tribune* outlined Sasha’s depression, her illness, her suicide, her treatment and her love of swimming. Her parents had already started a fund to increase awareness of BPD.

And as Pat read, he discovered he was part of the story.

“As an organ donor, Menu Courey’s heart has already helped save the life of a 26-year-old man,” the article stated. “Her parents hope her story saves more. ... Her family hopes to learn more in the coming weeks about the man who received Menu Courey’s heart.”

The article didn’t mention the sexual assault in Sasha’s story — that would come out later — but even the information Pat did have was overwhelming. He couldn’t imagine the pain her family went through. Wrapping his mind around what had happened was harder than being a patient, waiting in the hospital. “I get chills thinking about it,” he says. “I was in a tough, tough spot.”

Pat wrote back to Mike and Lynn. His letter began sweetly, stumbling over their last names and hoping they didn’t mind he’d found them on Facebook. He told them Sasha has an amazing story, spelling out AMAZING in all caps.

“I say ‘has’ on purpose,” he wrote. “The word ‘had’ implies it is over, and I am proof it is far from that. ... As you might imagine, I read everything about Sasha that I could. Never before have I been to page 26 of a Google search.”

Pat outlined their converging constellations: one setting, one rising.

He can joke about pretty much anything, even his heart. But speaking about Sasha, he struggles for words.

### The grief

Accepting the loss of her sister was Kayla’s first step in healing. “First, I needed to wake up in the morning and

stop remembering, ‘Oh, Sasha’s not alive anymore,’” she says. Everyday moments, like hearing a song on the radio by Nelly or Train, can remind her of her sister. On Kayla’s birthday, she remembers Sasha will miss birthdays, and weddings, and anniversaries, and graduations. Everything.

When strangers ask if she’s an only child, she hesitates to answer.

“It’s very raw and hard,” Kayla says. Not to mention that the media made her bereavement public. “I just would hate for people to see me as kind of a broken person, because I’m not. At all.” In fact, she’s the kind of person friends go to for counsel. “This is a huge part of my life and a huge part of my growing process, but it’s not who I am. It’s how I came to be who I am.”

Summers are still sad for Mike and Lynn. They spend much of the school year speaking to students and organizing for their annual Borderline Walk through the Sashbear Foundation, so they have down time in the summer. Those were the months when both their girls used to come home. This summer, Kayla stayed in Halifax. And Sasha, well, “it’s really, really hard on a daily basis not to shed a tear,” Lynn says. “As much as

## Organ Donation

Around 2,600 people in Kansas and Missouri are waiting for donors to save their lives. Sixty-seven percent of Missouri adults are in the donor registry, which you can join any time at [YesTheyWantMe.com](http://YesTheyWantMe.com). Kansas and Missouri have first-person authorization registries, which means no one can override the registrant’s stated wishes and stipulations.

Nationally, someone is added to the organ waiting list every 10 minutes. On average, 18 people die daily because there just aren’t enough donated organs. According to [organdonor.gov](http://organdonor.gov), “The reality is that the number of candidates waiting continues to dwarf the number of donor organs available.”

Last year, almost 30,000 people received an organ. As of 2012, 76.8% of heart recipients were still living five years after their transplants.

Lynn, Pat, Karen and Mike



you're trying to move on, it doesn't change the fact that your daughter is still not there."

### October 2011: The Scrabble board

One day, as Pat was back at work in Sen. Brown's office, a constituent called. She was waiting for a lung transplant. She was on two lists — one in Boston, one in Pittsburgh — but didn't know how she would get to Pittsburgh on time if the call came. "I was nervous for her," Pat says. So he found a charity that would fly her to Pittsburgh on short notice, giving them both peace of mind. He knew what it felt like to be desperate.

One weekend in October, Pat and Karen went to Ithaca, New York, for a relaxing weekend. Karen watched him bound ahead of her on the hiking trails, thrilled he had more energy than she. The old Pat couldn't make it straight through a round of golf.

After dinner that first night in Ithaca, they went back to their bed and breakfast inn. A Scrabble board was set up on the bed, tiles arranged: "KAREN WILL YOU MARRY ME"

She said yes.

### June 2012: The meeting

Contact with the transplant recipient can be part of healing. Organ procurement organizations such as Midwest Transplant Network, which coordinates donations in Kansas and western Missouri, have processes to allow parties to reach each other anonymously when both are ready. Once they learn about each other, they can choose to give their names and continue corresponding or even meet.

Not all want to connect. Pat doesn't remember his mother ever meeting her donor, though she taught him and his brother a profound kind of gratefulness. "They both have to feel that the time is right," says Marcia Schoenfeld, donor family services coordinator at Midwest Transplant Network. The ones who do want to meet often want to share about their loved one, and donors want to say thank you, as meager as those words feel. "They're connected in a way that's indescribable," Marcia says.

Families tell her, time and time again, that organ or tissue donation was the only good thing that came from a loved one's death.

But when Mike and Lynn came to Boston for a reunion for the residents of 3East who had been in treatment the same time as Sasha, Karen worried

survivor's guilt would weigh on Pat. "And also, how do you even say thank you?" she says. "There's nothing you can say."

Every anniversary of Pat's new heart is like a new birthday for him. He can finally relax. He can finally live. And yet, he says, "If I could somehow reverse what happened to Sasha, I would do it in half a second."

Mike, Lynn, Karen and Pat met for a brunch that stretched into three hours, until the cafe was about to close. They talked about his heart and her heart. His life and her life.

"It probably was one of the best things for him, to be able to say thank you," Karen says. They talked about Sasha. They cried.

Karen says it's still hard for her when they see Mike and Lynn, knowing that the best day of Pat's life was the worst day of theirs. Bittersweet to the utmost.

"He's enjoying life for her," Lynn says.

### January 2014: The tidal wave

Pat, now a legislative aide in Massachusetts state Sen. Don Humason's office, checked his Twitter feed. It was bursting with news of an MU swimmer: Sasha Menu Courey. Pat watched the ESPN video and read the story as Sasha's heart beat in his chest. The unsettled feelings he had when he first found out about her struggle surged again.

Kayla had to stop reading responses to articles about her sister, responses that distilled Sasha's life to rape and suicide. But the moment of national attention created momentum for the Sashbear Foundation.

Mike remembers texting Pat something about making waves for mental health. Pat replied it was more like a tsunami.

### Sasha's heart

Once, at practice, Sasha was in the midst of sprint circuits, powering through the water with a resistance chute dragging behind her. When she wasn't looking, an assistant coach and a teammate pranked her by attaching an extra chute to her belt. Usually, the coach recalled in a note to Lynn, swimmers would take notice after a lap or two.

Not Sasha.

She did the entire set with two chutes, working harder because she thought she was just getting tired. The team all laughed when she found out, Sasha the loudest, her coach wrote. Double-chute drills were thereafter dubbed Sashas.

Her heart was strong. Is strong.

Lynn recalls one of her daughter's teammates, in remembrance, calling Sasha the girl with the golden heart. It's still beating. And that lightens the weight of the pain, even if just a little. 

## The Sashbear Foundation and DBT

Dialectical Behavior Therapy, or DBT, was developed by Marsha Linehan, PhD, who said in 2011 that she'd overcome her own mental illness as a young woman. She realized she needed to accept the way she was in order to change, and she believes other suicidal people can benefit from that mindset.

DBT is an evidence-based therapy that teaches patients skills to manage their emotions and deal with the stresses of life. It's drug-free. A DBT instruction manual calls it "a life worth living program." One of the major DBT skills Mike and Lynn now teach through school visits and group sessions is validation: acknowledging emotions for what they are, instead of judging them or simply wishing they were different. Part of Mike and Lynn's goal with the Sashbear Foundation is to teach those skills to everyone, so individuals struggling with mental illness can live in environments that are supportive and receptive.