



Hughvon Polk with two of his four children, sons Isaac and Hughvon Jr.



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# MOTHER HONORS DONOR IN SPIRIT SON BY ADVOCATING FOR DONATION

Organ and tissue donation is a clinical, emotional and complex process. Saying yes to donation is courageous and generous, but it is not always easy. For Yolanda Wallace, the donation experience was filled with doubt and fears, but, ultimately, she is honoring her son's giving nature by using her experience and voice to help future donor families.

Yolanda has been a registered organ and tissue donor from the time she became eligible to sign up. But, since the tragic murder of her son, Hughvon Polk, in 2015, Yolanda has become a full-fledged advocate for offering the gift of life.

"I've been sharing the message of organ and tissue donation with so many people and the experience has really made me embrace life," said Yolanda. "I've spoken with people, who've lost their loved ones about whether they became donors and about their personal experiences with donation. I think it's beautiful that a loved one could continue living through a person or people waiting on a kidney or a cornea. That this is life after death — to give back to someone who is really in need."

But advocating so powerfully for organ and tissue donation wasn't always easy for Yolanda. Her personal experience with donation was difficult and complex.

## A TRAGIC LOSS

The day after celebrating his 24th birthday, Hughvon went to the store with some friends to grab a pack of cigarettes. While sitting in his van at a red light, a man walked up and shot into the vehicle, striking him and his friends. Hughvon was taken to Mount Sinai Medical Center in Chicago, where he was pronounced dead.

Hughvon was a registered organ and tissue donor. When he passed away he was eligible for tissue donation only due to the nature of his injuries, and Yolanda initially supported his decision to offer that gift. Unfortunately, shortly after expressing her support, myths and misinformation about what might happen to Hughvon's body during and after donation influenced Yolanda, and she retracted her support. In doing so she prevented donation from moving forward.

"I changed my mind because well-meaning people told me inaccurate things about how the body would look," said Yolanda. "How the eyes, the face, the body wouldn't look the same. I felt bad because he was a registered donor, and I didn't follow through. I went off of hearsay, and it never should have gone that way because I taught him how to be a giver and he wanted to help others."

It's a decision she hopes to correct by educating as many people as possible about the benefits of donation and by refuting those same myths and misconceptions that kept her from standing by her son's decision to offer the gift of life.

## LAUGHTER AND LIGHT

In life, Hughvon was a talented musician who spent much of his time in music studios writing and recording songs. He even published some of his music on YouTube before his death. He was also an extremely skilled basketball player but stepped off the court when he was in grade school, opting to focus on his creative writing.

"I would hear him in his room [when he was a teenager] playing his music," said Yolanda. "I always say this was his way of soul-searching and expressing, and it was just great how he would be in there, creating and developing his own sound."

The father of four kids, Hughvon was known as a happy, spontaneous, outgoing spirit who kept everyone laughing. "He was just the laughter," said Yolanda. "Master of the party and family gatherings."

## A DONOR IN SPIRIT

After Hughvon's passing, Yolanda met families of organ and tissue donors who shared their stories and erased the misinformation and misgivings Yolanda had about the donation experience. In November 2018, Gift of Hope invited Yolanda to tell Hughvon's story at an organization-wide event, where she heard the stories of donor families and transplant recipients who gave or received the gift of life through donation. Yolanda was touched by their powerful testimonies and had the opportunity to learn more about the lasting benefits of organ and tissue donation.

"I thought, wow, that could have been my son's corneas shining through this little girl or this little boy," said Yolanda. "That could've been my son's tissue offering a better life to this boy or this girl or this woman or this man."

Yolanda encourages families to educate themselves so that they can make informed decisions on behalf of their loved ones. Tearing down the myths around organ and tissue donation is one of Gift of Hope's ongoing goals — and major challenges. The organization carries out hundreds of events each year to ensure that people receive factual and helpful information that will guide them in their donation decisions and help them honor their loved ones' memories by choosing donation on their behalf.

"Don't think twice about offering and giving the gift of life because you're being a hero," said Yolanda. "You're giving a precious gift to someone else — to live, to sing, to dance, to run again. Just to smell another rose. Or to look up and see the stars. You're giving them hope."