Janice’s Story: Embracing New Family

On January 24, 2013, Janice Campbell’s world changed forever. That’s the day her daughter, Dr. Jamila Irons-Johnson, suffered a fatal aneurysm rupture. Dr. Irons-Johnson was a 35-year-old psychologist at the time who focused on supporting often abused or neglected children. The married mother of two worked at Saint Peter’s University Hospital, where she was the Supervising Psychologist for the Dorothy B. Heirsch Child Protection Center. She was admired and loved by those with whom she worked.

Upon her passing, Campbell and her daughter’s family made the decision to donate her organs. That night, Dr. Irons-Johnson saved the lives of six people.

“My son-in-law said, ‘Mom, she would want that. She was a giving person,’” Campbell recalled. Dr. Irons-Johnson donated two kidneys and her heart, liver and pancreas as well as her lungs.

Janice McNamara was one of those whose life was saved. McNamara had suffered from a serious lung ailment and required 24-7 oxygen provided from a tank. With her condition declining, McNamara knew time was running out. But late one night, McNamara received the call she was waiting for—a donor had been identified.

“There is no doubt the transplant saved my life,” McNamara said, proud that today she is doing remarkably well. But in the back of her mind, she wanted to know the person who cared enough to ensure that upon her death, her lungs would go to someone who would otherwise die without a transplant.

Today, Campbell and McNamara are best friends. And if you were to ask either of them, they would tell you that they are now family as well. “I never had a large family. But now I feel like I have this wonderful big family. Every morning, I hug my chest and say, ‘Good morning Jamila. Thank you so much!’”

Next summer, Campbell and McNamara will participate together on Team Liberty at the 2020 Donate Life Transplant Games right here in New Jersey. The Games will have a competition division for Donor Families, so that families like the Campbells and the McNamaras can celebrate new life and pay tribute to those who made it possible.