



## Your neighbor could be a hero or heroine



Do you have a hero or a heroine? Could it be someone in your life that made a difference? Someone that you look up to? You admire?

The true definition of a hero — “people that show great courage” ([www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hero](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hero))

could be found in individuals that you come in contact with each day. On July 11-15, Pittsburgh hosted the 2008 National Transplant Games. Approximately 1,300 people ranging in age from 2 to 82 came to Pittsburgh to compete. As volunteers from the Center for Healthy Aging, we were honored to meet so many brave people.

Beginning in 1992, the National Kidney Foundation held their first National Transplant Games. These games recognize individuals of all ages who have had life saving organ transplants. This event is modeled after the Olympic-style games and includes athletes that compete in track and field, swimming, bowling, badminton as well as many other sports. The games are a way for organ transplant recipients and their families to unite with others who have had life saving transplants.

Additionally, families who donated their loved ones' organs as well as living donors cheer on their team and experience healing. The National Transplant Games take place every 2 years.

The following two athletes were interviewed and in our eyes are true heroines.

Karen, a 55-year-old athlete from New York, is just like any other woman. She enjoys traveling, reading and biking. However, the only difference is Karen had a kidney transplant 20 years ago. During the games in Pittsburgh, she competed in swimming and won the silver medal in the breaststroke.

Karen began competing in the Transplant Games in 1992 and has not missed a game since. She began competing because she wanted to meet others who had transplants just like herself. She found there were not as many people who attended the games in 1992 and is excited by the fact the numbers have increased through the years.

Karen commented that after her transplant, she realized she had a second chance to live. Now if she wants to do something, she goes for it! She now realizes how precious life is.

The Olympic experience has given her a new outlook on life. Karen traveled to the games this year with her husband who always supports her. She does not consider herself an inspiration, but she does realize that

when she tells her story the public is often surprised about how well she is doing. Karen is truly an inspiration.

Bernice, a 68-year-old woman also from New York, participated in the National Transplant Games for the first time this summer. She, like all other participating athletes, had a transplant which saved her life. Any athlete faces challenges from time to time, but the hardest obstacle Bernice faced was within months of the death of her high school sweetheart/husband of many decades.

Bernice's declining medical conditions sent her to the intensive care unit and later to the final stages of liver failure. Upon receiving a liver transplant, it was Bernice's nature to continue to compete; not only as an athlete, but as a strong woman.

After her powerful recovery, Bernice continued to exercise by walking and doing water aerobics. She wanted to compete in the games to prove to herself and her family that she could.

All the transplant families are family and they all share a special connection. It was at the Pittsburgh games where Bernice showed off her table tennis skills and won a bronze medal. Bernice's greatest inspiration is still her husband; however, she is an inspiration to many others by volunteering on the transplant floor of Strong Memorial Hospital in New York for the past four years. Through her physically active lifestyle, strong personality, and active volunteering, Bernice certainly feels young. She quotes Marie Dressler, “It's not how old you are, it's how you are old.” ([www.pearlsoup.com](http://www.pearlsoup.com))

As you can see, Karen and Bernice have overcome many obstacles. They are strong women who never stopped fighting. The transplant games have united these ladies and will continue to unite people over decades in the future. It is the everyday heroes and heroines like Karen and Bernice that make you realize how precious life really is and how important it is to live life to the fullest.

Who knows, there may be a hero or heroine living right next door to you! Living life to the fullness may bring you a “Healthier Tomorrow”.

*This article was written by Alicia Owens and Melissa Woodall, Student Interns at the Center for Healthy Aging (CHA). CHA is a part of the Department of Epidemiology, in the Graduate School of Public Health, at the University of Pittsburgh. It is one of 33 Prevention Research Centers in the United States funded by the Centers for Disease Control.*

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