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# 12-year-old boy's heart saved her life

*Wall of organ donors unveiled at Medical Center*

**By Ricardo Kaulessar**  
*Reporter Staff Writer*

**W**hen Edison Hernandez, 12, of Jersey City, died in an accident in December of 2003, Mae Howard of South Jersey got his heart.

Young Edison Hernandez was one of the organ donors who will live on through Jersey City Medical Center's "Wall of Heroes," a tribute to the donors that was unveiled on the hospital's second floor on Wednesday.

Most of the donors died in the past seven years at the Medical Center. One of them was Jersey City Policeman Marc DiNardo, whose organs were donated after he was killed during a shootout last July that also injured four other officers.

His widow, Mary DiNardo, was present for the ceremony. DiNardo said her husband's heart, kidneys, soft tissue, and bone were donated to recipients whom she knows.

"This is all very inspiring," DiNardo said.

Many of the deceased donors contributed organs to people who may have been strangers, but some organs went to those close to them.

Union City resident Frank Noel was a kidney recipient in June 2008, a blessing borne out of tragedy. The perfectly functioning kidney in Noel's body came from his uncle, Wilson Vega, who was hit by a car in Jersey City while riding his bike.

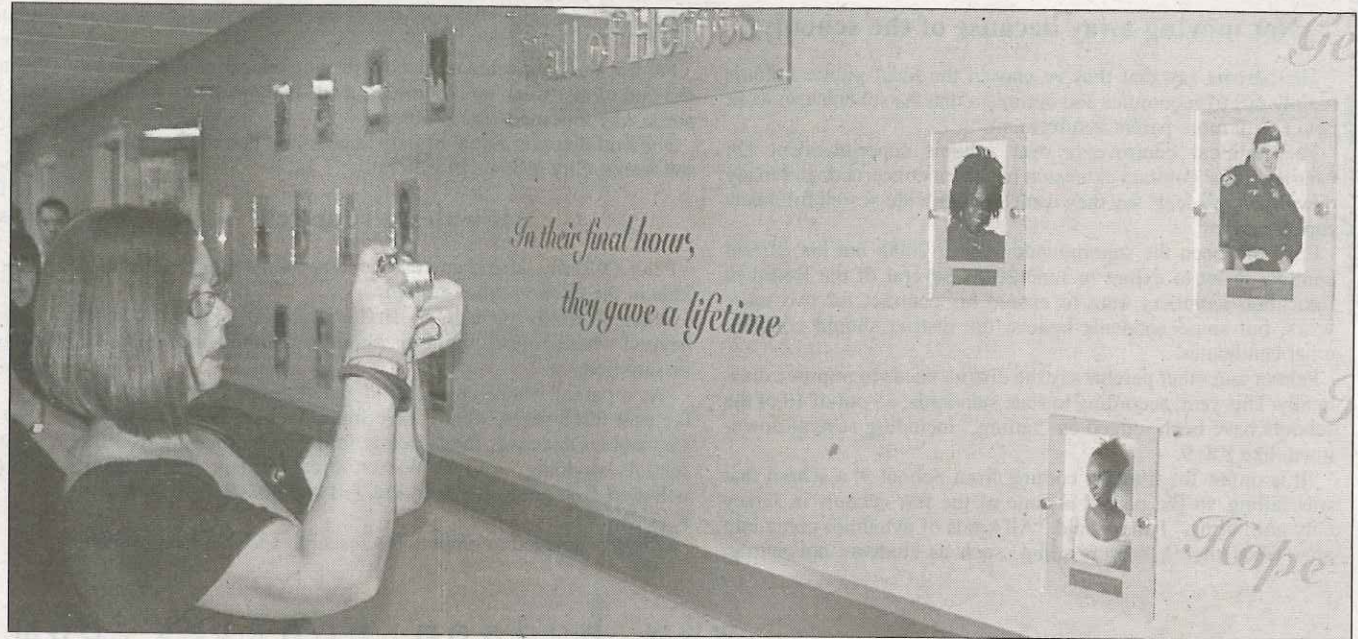
"I am very grateful to my cousins for letting me have their father's kidneys," said Noel, who called Wilson a "father."

## Choked with emotion

Many were teary-eyed at the ceremony. Choked with emotion was Barbara Mendolla, the mother of Jonathan Epps. Epps died in March 2009 after suffering a head trauma while stepping out of a moving vehicle on a Hoboken street.

Mendolla came with family, including Epps' father, Jersey City Schools Superintendent Dr. Charles Epps. "It is just a magnificent tribute to the organ donors and the recipients of the organs," Mendolla said. Her son contributed his heart, liver, kidneys, and cornea to various recipients in New Jersey and other states, but she has not met the recipients.

The wall is a result of collaboration between the Medical Center and the NJ Sharing Network, an organization dedicated to raising awareness about organ and tissue donation.



**REMEMBERING SLAIN OFFICER** – Mary DiNardo, the widow of slain Jersey City police officer Marc DiNardo, takes a snapshot of her late husband's photograph on the "Wall of Heroes." The wall on the second floor of Jersey City Medical Center is dedicated to organ donors.

In particular, Medical Center nurses Jessica Walsh, Cristina Simeone, Christine Pangilinan, and other hospital employees worked on designing the wall starting six months ago, and completed construction about two weeks ago. The wall not only has photographs of donors but also letters from recipients thanking donor families, as well as a video screen showing donors and recipients.

## Receiving a special gift

Before the tour, a dedication ceremony was held in the Medical Center's cafeteria, where organ recipients shared their experiences about receiving a vital transplant.

Howard, the woman who received the 12-year-old boy's heart, spoke at the ceremony about meeting Edison's mother and relatives for the first time a few months after the transplant.

## HEROES *from page 7*

"You can't help feel a certain bit of guilt and anxiety, but all of that was put to ease when my donor's younger sister told me, 'Edison would have picked you - he loved blondes,'" said Howard, to laughter.

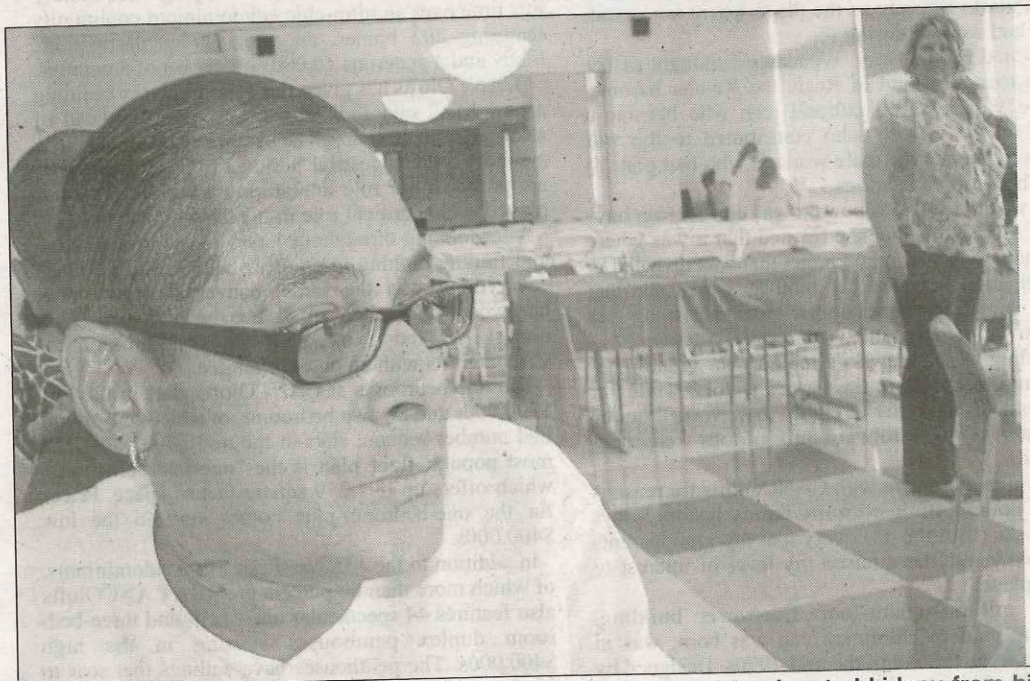
### Organ benefit

William Reitsma, director of clinical services for the Sharing Network, said after a patient arrives at a hospital deceased or on the verge of dying, the hospital will contact the Sharing Network if the patient meets the criteria for donation, such as the degree of injury and condition of organs.

Then the Sharing Network sends a team to evaluate the patient to see if he/she qualifies as a donor. If qualified, then discussions are held with the family of the deceased to see if they want to donate organs.

Afterward, surgeons from hospitals in need of organs for transplants travel to retrieve the donated organ and bring it back to their home hospital in less than 24 hours.

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**SAVED BY TRAGEDY** - Union City resident Frank Noel received a donated kidney from his uncle, the late Wilson Vega, back in 2008.