

The gift of life: A mother's loss becomes a future for those in need of organs

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BETHALTO - Tammy Laycock lost her son, Shane Laycock, to suicide on Nov. 11, 2015. He was only 11 years old.

Before his untimely death, Tammy Laycock said her son inquired about the little heart on her ID. She told him it meant she would donate her organs if anything were to ever

happen to her. She said his eyes grew wide at that thought and he told her he would like to do that too. She told him he could whenever he had an ID of his own. She said it was his decision to make.

Unfortunately, Shane Laycock did not live long enough to be able to place that little heart on his ID.

Shane Laycock had autism, the symptoms of which caused his short life to be full of turmoil and heartbreak. Tammy Laycock said her son was the victim of bullying as well as a system, which did little to help him deal with his autism and bullying. Because of that, Shane Laycock was constantly trying to run or escape his life.

In one incident in August 2015, Shane Laycock climbed to the top of a very large tree in their neighborhood. The Bethalto Fire Department arrived at the scene to help him from the tree, but Shane Laycock refused to comply. He continued to stay in the tree until the firefighters promised to assemble a stationary bicycle in the garage for him. Shane Laycock loved spending his days' excess energy on that bicycle, and he was ecstatic when the Bethalto firefighters made good on that promise.

That same garage was the location of one of the most horrific moments of Tammy Laycock's life, however, as that summer turned to late fall.

On Nov. 11, 2015, Tammy Laycock and two of her children went for a short walk around the block near their Bethalto home, leaving 11-year-old Shane Laycock playing in the garage as his 15-year-old brother was staying at the home.

"When I left, I heard him playing in the garage," she recalled. "Everything was normal."

When she returned from what she described as a six minute walk, Tammy Laycock said her boys went to join their brother in the garage. Instead of hearing the sound of her children playing, Tammy Laycock instead heard her son coming out of the garage in tears saying Shane Laycock had hanged himself with an electrical cord.

"I thought they were kidding me again," she said. "It took a second to go from hearing it, to thinking it was true to actually running in there."

She discovered her youngest son hanging with an electrical cord around his neck, so she immediately brought him down from the garage's ceiling and started CPR on him.

"Somewhere in another lifetime, I could hear my son's screaming from the other room," Tammy Laycock said.

As she was trying to revive her son, a neighbor noticed the commotion and asked what was wrong. Tammy Laycock told the neighbor to take over breathing as she continued to perform chest compression. The neighbor revealed she did not know CPR, however.

"It is so important for everyone to know CPR," Tammy Laycock said. "Even if you don't have kids anymore, you never know when it may be needed."

Once emergency services responded to the scene, though, Tammy Laycock was forced to leave her son's side as the professionals took the mantle of performing lifesaving techniques and operations. Tammy Laycock said her youngest son was soon loaded onto an ambulance and was taken to Alton Memorial Hospital before she knew what was even happening. She said Shane Laycock was able to breathe on his own during transport, but he was still unconscious.

When she was allowed to see him in the hospital, Tammy Laycock said she told her son he was the "Eye of the Tiger" and to keep fighting. She said Shane Laycock was a fan of the *Rocky* franchise and especially loved the Survivor song perpetually tied to the films. She hoped, despite his level of consciousness, he was able to hear her encouraging words.

For that same reason, however, she left his side when she felt as if she was going to break into tears.

"I know even when people are in comas, sometimes they wake up and say they heard everything happening," she said. "I did not want him to hear me cry."

After doctors at Alton Memorial Hospital did all they could, Tammy Laycock said a "big diesel ambulance" soon came from Children's Hospital in St. Louis.

"The entire ride there, no one moved or said anything," she said. "I'd ridden in ambulances with Shane before and there was always chit-chatting or something. The nurses kept telling me, 'it's OK, he's still here,' and I kept watching him to see if he would move."

As many as 15 people were waiting for the mother and her unresponsive son as they arrived in St. Louis. Tammy Laycock recalled wanting to drape him in a blanket because he looked so cold.

After doctors and nurses worked to revive him, Tammy Laycock said the floor around where they were operating "looked like a party just happened," because of all the trash left from the wrappings of everything they used on Shane Laycock to keep him alive. A nurse came to her as she looked at the aftermath and offered her fresh clothes and a

shower. Tammy Laycock was covered with her son's vomit after attempting CPR on him after his attempted suicide.

"The doctor came to tell me things 'looked really really bad,'" Tammy Laycock said. "They said it would be another few hours before I could see him, because they had to hook him up to the machines."



As she waited for her son to be attached to life support systems, a representative of the Department of Human Services asked Tammy Laycock if she had left a nine-year-old boy home alone. He said he was sent by the Bethalto Police Department. After she explained the situation, including the part in which Tammy Laycock's youngest child was 11 and not nine, she said the worker apologized profusely and left.

Following that man's departure, she was able to see Shane Laycock again, and spent the entire night in his room next to him, listening to his favorite music group - the Christian band the Newsboys.

Doctors advised Tammy Laycock she should not be alone following her awaking on the rail of her young son's bed, so she called her oldest son from Oklahoma to be by her

side. He waited with his mother as doctors told her they needed to perform tests on Shane Laycock to see if he was brain dead. It was at that time Tammy Laycock's fear and suffering reached its breaking point.

"I said no, don't do it," she said. "I said I didn't want them done. I just wanted to see him get better."

Eventually, she gave doctors permission to run the three required tests, and her oldest son joined doctors for the first test. It was after that test doctors asked Tammy Laycock if her son would donate his organs. She recalled the conversation she had with him about the little heart on her ID and told them he would be donating his organs. They told her his vitals were slipping, and pending the results of subsequent testing, they would have to call the transplant nurses soon.

"Then I went into his room, and told everyone to leave me alone," she said. "I did not want to see anyone or hear from anyone. I just wanted to be alone in his room. I closed the curtains and asked if I could lay next to him. He's got tubes and wires everywhere. I can't see his little face, his little mouth or his little nose. I could hold his hands - and that's it."

Around 3:20 a.m., Tammy Laycock said the doctor came into the room to perform the last test.

"He said, 'Tammy, I'm going to tell you now he's brain dead, and he's not coming back,'" she recalled. "I just broke down. I said, 'but his arm moved!' He said it was an involuntary reflex, but he's not there anymore. I didn't want to tell him bye yet."

Tammy Laycock said she decided to join the doctors for the final test to determine if Shane Laycock was brain dead or not. In retrospect, she believes she made the wrong decision.

"I wish to God I would have never ever ever been there for that, because it was horrific to me," she said. "It was basically just doing a physical on him with reflexes and stuff like that. That wasn't bad. They kept his eyes closed with Vaseline stuff. When they opened his eyes, there was nobody there. You could tell there was nobody there. He was gone. It tore me to pieces."

When the doctors left the room, Tammy Laycock removed some of the pieces of machinery attached to her son's lifeless body and laid next to him again.

"It's so weird what machinery can do, because I looked at him and could feel his heartbeat," she said. "I could feel his pulse, but he wasn't there. I could fool myself

forever thinking he was there if they hadn't opened his eyes like that. They were blank. Shane's eyes always sparkling. He had so much life, but there was nothing left."

A nurse from MidAmerica Transplant Services came to Tammy Laycock as she laid next to her son and assured her they would talk to him and play his favorite music as the procedures were performed. Tammy Laycock left her son in the care of those nurses on a Thursday, and by that Sunday, some of his organs had found new homes.

At least one of Shane Laycock's kidneys was donated to Lisa Swift Robins. Robins has had kidney issues since she was 17, and is currently approaching the benchmark of 50 years old. Her ailments were misdiagnosed for several years, and Shane Laycock's kidney allowed her to continue her life without the burdens of potential kidney failure.

Tammy Laycock said she exchanged letters with Robins through the transplant service, but did not really get to know Robins until they began exchanging Facebook messages with one another. During those conversations, Robins revealed after accepting Shane Laycock's organ donation, she began craving water, pizza and ranch dressing - all foods

for which she never previously had a taste, yet they were among Shane Laycock's favorite delicacies.



Robins told Tammy Laycock she had an urge to visit her on Mother's Day every time she passed a photograph of Shane Laycock. Tammy Laycock said Robins left her number and said she was willing to meet with Tammy Laycock anywhere she chose. As it happened, Robins was from as close as Caseyville, Illinois.

"She lives in Caseyville," Tammy Laycock said. "We could have easily at any time crossed paths while Shane was alive."

The two enjoyed a Mother's Day dinner together, and spent time talking from 3-7 p.m. After that meeting, Tammy Laycock said she knew her son was "looking down from heaven and smiling."

"Shane's blood runs within her now, because of the kidneys," Tammy Laycock said. "We are family now. That's all there is to it. She loves Shane like one of her own children. Shane would not have picked anyone better in the whole world for one of his kidneys."

Tammy Laycock said her son's kidney may last as long as 16 years inside Robins's body. When it fails someday, she said she would likely offer her own to Robins.

"If Shane was a match, there's a good chance I'll be a match too," Tammy Laycock said. "She has been such a blessing in my life. There are so many things we share. There are lots of common birthdays between the two of us - lots of common denominators in our lives. It's amazing how I had to lose my son, but I was able to find someone really good too. I know Shane is in heaven, and I know he couldn't be more proud looking down and seeing what his death is doing for other people."

Shane Laycock's donations also included muscle tissue to a man who suffered an injury. Before that injury, Tammy Laycock said he taught soccer to impoverished children in the inner city as well as across the world in locations such as Africa. Another man is a sophomore in college and received the gift of Shane Laycock's ligaments, which were needed after he too suffered an injury. Tammy Laycock said he is currently able to pursue his dreams of being a university athletic director.

Currently, Tammy Laycock said Robins is helping her with her move to Gillespie, and added the two of them would definitely be friends well into the future.

"As much as I have this huge hold in my heart, and it's taken me 18 months to get a handle on it, I now have someone like Lisa coming in with so much love," she said. "It's such a good feeling."