the DAD tree  By Ida Kelleher, Donor Wife

My husband Mark died suddenly a few weeks before Christmas in 2008 and became an organ and tissue donor. After his death, a close friend was looking for a way to help, found our artificial tree in the attic and set it up. But as the days passed, no one had the energy to decorate it.

When I thought about what a loving husband and father Mark was, it seemed more relevant to decorate the tree in honor of him. I told my kids, Michael, 20, and Marci, 12, “You know what, let’s skip the Christmas decorations. Go around the house and find things that you gave dad or dad gave you, and things that remind you of him or things that were important to all of us. It doesn’t have to be a regular Christmas tree; let’s make it a dad tree.”

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It was really amazing watching them. We were all saying, “Remember this” and laughing and carrying on and crying. It was cathartic.

My daughter Marci swam, so she hung a team shirt on the tree. My son Michael hung t-shirts from football, wrestling and crew. We put an old dog leash on it because Mark walked the dog every day. Every now and then Mark would have a Michelob Ultra-light, so we washed out a can and put it on there. The sunglasses Mark wore were on there. We’re also big Seinfeld fans so we added a Seinfeld puffy shirt. We included pictures of friends and kids and family.

We included his work boots and a few of his guitar picks. We hung a picture of Mark when he ran the marathon and one of the sneakers he ran in. We put a little stuffed animal on it that he had given Marci—one she carried everywhere and had sent to him in the hospital. We were always finding his socks everywhere, so we put one of his socks on there—it was funny. We hung up his safety glasses. There were a million things on this tree. Then we said, “What are we going to put on top?” We decided to take the hard hat he wore to work every day. It had electrical tape wrapped around it and a light on top for working at night. We placed it on top of the tree.

After the holidays, we didn’t want to take it apart, because we really loved it. So we moved it from the den to a corner of the living room, and on special occasions, we turn on the lights and sit there and really feel his presence. It just keeps him so much a part of us. It’s welcoming and very comforting. The neat thing is we can still add to it. Anytime we go on a long day trip or do something special, we buy a little something for Mark and put it on the tree. I plan to write letters to his recipients, and when I do, I’ll put a copy of those on the tree, too. The tree is our place to remember Mark; it’s full of life and in his home, which he took so much pride in, and it’s with his family, which he also took so much pride in. It might not be right for everyone, but it sure is right for us.