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## Area man works tirelessly to raise awareness for organ donation

By: DEIRDRE NEWMAN - Staff Writer

TEMECULA ---- Rudolph Coenen is not one to sit around and wait. While hepatitis C has ravaged his body and sapped his energy, it hasn't deterred him from his crusade.

As he waited for a liver transplant, the 40-year-old Temecula resident cruised around Southern California in a donated recreational vehicle spreading awareness about an organization he created to promote organ donation ---- A Gift of Life.

He is now in Florida, where it is expected that the wait for a new liver will be much shorter than it would be in California, he said.

The RV was donated in April. Since then, Coenen has been traveling in it to health fairs around the region to promote and sign people up for Donate Life California Registry, a Web site authorized by the state that started in April. Since he has been on his mission, he has signed up about 4,500 people for the registry, he said recently. Nearly 77,000 have registered since April 1, said Lisa Stocks, executive director of Life Sharing, one of the four centers around the state that manages the registry and the one that Coenen works with.

"Your body is just a vessel and if you can give life at the time of death, that's the noblest thing you can do," he said.

His plight and his tireless promotion of organ donation recently earned him attention on two fronts, including one that could save his life. One is from the Pechanga Band of Luiseno Indians, which signed on as a corporate sponsor to his organization and is helping him in his effort to expedite getting a new liver, Coenen said.

The other is from Transplant Recipients International Organization, a Washington, DC-based nonprofit agency that works to enhance the quality of life of transplant candidates, recipients, their families and the families of organ and tissue donors.

The president of the Transplant Recipient chapter in Ventura County, Ron Taubman, was impressed with Coenen's passion in promoting organ donation, Coenen's wife, Maribel, said.

Taubman connected Rudolph Coenen with Jeffrey Steers, the director of transplants at the Mayo Clinic in Florida. Coenen said Steers told him the wait for a liver in Florida for someone in Coenen's medical state was less than two months. He said Steers thought it would be to Coenen's advantage to come to Florida in the hopes of getting a liver.

In California, it could take 1 1/2 years for Coenen to get a liver transplant, Maribel Coenen said. Taubman said the difference is because demand in Florida is considered less than in California.

"There are more livers, more hearts, more lungs, more everything (in Florida)," Taubman said.

The family, which includes four daughters and two dogs, headed to Florida Wednesday. They anticipate staying there until a match is found, Coenen said.

Rudolph Coenen was diagnosed with hepatitis C in October and learned he was in need of a liver transplant. After a slew of tests, he was put on a waiting list in the middle of February.

He is now in the final stage of liver disease, which he has been told is the optimal time for a liver transplant. The hepatitis C has done its damage and is not in the body any longer. Thus, the disease wouldn't infect a transplanted liver, he said.

The Pechanga tribe will be paying for the family's travel to Florida and for other expenses, public relations manager Ciara Coyle said. It is also trying to set up lodging for the family with members of an Indian tribe in Florida, Coyle said.

Although the tribe is inundated for requests for contributions, this one struck a chord, Patrick Murphy, president of Pechanga Development Corp., stated in a news release issued earlier this week.

"He is a father, a veteran and a member of our community and we're glad that we could help Rudy in this way," Murphy said in the release. "Our thoughts and prayers are with him and his family." All this support has touched the Coenens and affirmed their faith in humanity, Maribel Coenen said.

"It's really hard to go through something like this; your whole life changes," she said. "But whoever's going through the same thing or something similar, they should have a lot of hope in humanity, because there's still good people that are willing to help if you knock on their door and ask." Her husband remains optimistic that he will find a match and continue his quest of spreading awareness to the masses.

"I truly believe the Lord has given me an opportunity to make a change in society and I believe I'm going to come back with a new liver ... and I'm going to explode like a nova and really make a positive change on the West Coast," he said.

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