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Honor Walk: A Message to a Grieving Mother

By Angela Cooke-Jackson



© Honor Walk. Angela Cooke-Jackson. Watercolor

The *Honor Walk* is done at hospitals when a donor patient who is on life support receives a ceremonial honor from family, friends and medical staff for their organ contribution.

Sadly, today, I watched a heart-wrenching video shared with me by a family member of an honor walk. My dear cousin's son received this commemoration. At 41, he suffered a brain injury and would not recover from the injury and would be taken off life support. He was an organ donor. I hold my cousin and her family in my thoughts and prayers. I hope they can sense the prayers and feel lifted in some way. I hope they feel wrapped in a shield of support.

African American men die at an alarming rate from many causes in our country: heart attacks, gun violence, suicide, chronic illness and cancer. One study found that Black males between the ages of 15 -24 die prematurely from homicide and suicide. Black males are less likely to be organ donors and even more unlikely to receive an organ as a transplant patient.

I marvel that my cousin's son - too young to be taken from this earth - had the foresight and wisdom to put his name on the organ donor list. It makes sense, however. My aunt, who died in 2001, was a heart transplant recipient, so her grandson understood with profound insight the power of an organ donation. He experienced firsthand this love shown to his grandmother.

Organ transplants in African American communities have historically been low, even though we are the largest group of minorities needing an organ transplant. For every Black person who donates an organ, 31 Black patients are waiting for a transplant.^[1] Black people still lack trust in the medical system and are not thoroughly educated about the value of organ donation for our communities. We are often unaware that donating our organs and tissue after death can save or improve as many as 75 lives.

The honor walk takes place at an 'odd pause between life and death' - a transition from this world to the spiritual realm. The honor walk gave space for my heartbroken cousin and our family to honor this young man's life and his final gift - the gift of donating his organs before his journey ends. Beautifully, the organ recipients will be given a rebirth because of him.

I hope my cousin knows she is loved and realizes, as she carries this insurmountable pain and attempts to make sense of the gravity of this reality, that we are holding her in our arms, thoughts and prayers. We pray that beauty can grow where her grief lives over time as she has space to understand the expansive contribution to other's lives that her son made. Be still my sweet cousin; *Rest in Peace*, her dear son.

Angela Cooke-Jackson is a college professor, health consultant and artist. Her expertise is in Health Communication and Behavioral Science. She uses community-based participatory research and media literacy to help communities curate and design innovative, practical applications for sustainable change. She is also the co-director of the [Intimate Communication Lab](#). She envisions her research at the nexus of culture, health disparities and marginalized populations. Her current scholarship incorporates intimacy and reproductive health to advance agency among underserved and marginalized people of color and gender minorities.

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