



"A BRAVE AND
CONSCIOUS
DECISION
TO GIVE LIFE"

*On Christmas Eve 2011, **Heiner Röschert** experienced the worst nightmare of every parent. He was told that his two children, Pia aged 27 and Felix aged 25, had been involved in a terrible traffic accident near his home in southern Germany. Pia died instantly, Felix some time later. Both carried an organ donor card*

■ THAT NIGHT, two cars apparently racing one another, crashed head-on into Felix and Pia's car. One of the oncoming drivers had been drinking alcohol. Brother and sister were driving home following a family Christmas Eve celebration with their father Heiner. Pia had promised to send a text message once she had arrived home safely. The message never arrived.

Felix was rushed to the emergency unit at the Uniklinikum Würzburg, which was his place of work at the time. As a nurse, Felix was very aware of the subject of organ donation. Heiner Röschert recalls that fateful night:

"Two hours after the accident, a police officer and an emergency pastor woke me up." They immediately informed me that Pia was dead. They also warned me not to have high hopes regarding Felix's condition. The word 'shock' cannot express what I felt at that moment. Even today, I can only remember that evening in fragments. Around 4 o'clock in the morning the counsellor brought me to the hospital to see my children.

"My mind was turned off"

"First, I wanted to see Felix and was immediately confronted by a senior physician who told me that they suspected he was brain dead. I could barely grasp the situation as he appeared so uninjured. The way he lay there, I was sure he could be helped by some sort of operation. My mind was turned off. Immediately afterwards I wanted to see my daughter Pia, who was laid down in the next room. She was pale and cold. She was dead."

Some hours later, Mr Röschert had a long conversation with the senior physician about Felix and they also touched on the subject of organ donation. Heiner, Felix and Pia had talked about that subject as a family in the past, mainly due to Felix's work at the hospital.

"I never doubted for a second that we should not ful-

fill his wishes," recalls Mr Röschert. The hospital contacted the German Organ Transplantation Foundation and the donation coordinator arrived from Munich.

"I never doubted for a second that we should not fulfill his wishes"

Some 30 hours later, and following the final diagnosis of brain death, Felix's organs were removed. It was around 9 am on Boxing Day, the day after Christmas. "During this time, I was well taken care of by the donation coordinator, and also by the medical personnel at the University Clinic," says Mr Röschert.

Five of Felix's organs were retrieved and transported to four recipients, three men and a woman.

"As a result of the organ donation to which Felix had consented, today, these four people were each gifted four years of life, I hope it will be many more," he explains.

"A group that understands itself without words"

"This terrible twist of fate almost six years ago has made me permanently unable to work," he explains. However, Mr Röschert came in contact with other relatives of organ donors and also transplanted patients through the German Organ Transplantation Foundation. In 2015, they came up with the idea to form a group, a community, a network. This was the first group in Germany made up solely from the relatives of organ donors. "We formed a group of people who understood each other without words."

The initial reason for forming the community was what these parents saw as a missing gratitude in society to organ donors. "We want to inform the public annually and bring attention to these special people (donors). We do not only want to use the official statistics from the German Organ Donation Foundation but



Pia and Felix Röschert in 2010 on their home-made Christmas card for their father Heiner, a year before the accident

also spread the stories of donation through the press and events."

He explains that the organisation Netzwerk für Angehörige von Organspendern currently has two main areas of activity. The first is a close support group, established only for the relatives of organ donors. The second involves the representatives of our group fulfilling public duties such as speaking in schools. "We are the ones affected and always will be. We speak from our own experience and can tell our story about organ donation," he explains. "But we do not only want to grieve, we also want to be heard and deliver an active contribution to society, and to create a higher awareness for organ donation."

According to Mr Röschert, organ donation should not be considered a matter of course, but he sees it as the greatest and most valuable gift, a life that can be gifted from one person to another. A sign of humanity

and lack of indifference. "Organ donation is a brave and conscious decision to give life," he says. "A precious decision, a priceless ability of any person who takes this decision."

"New beginnings"

He explains that organ recipients often feel uncomfortable and insecure about getting in touch with the relatives of organ donors. They are alive and can talk about their happy life while this is only due to the death of another person.

"But I want to hear that," he says. "Bear in mind that with organ donation, it is not necessarily just one life which is saved. I recently met a young organ recipient who after her transplantation was able to give birth to two kids. A donated organ this way can both save lives and give life." 🌱