

**Opening Statement of Everson Walls, former professional football
player and organ donor**
Information Policy, Census, and National Archives Subcommittee
Oversight and Government Reform Committee

Hearing on Organ Donation
2247 Rayburn HOB - 2:00 P. M.
Tuesday, September 25, 2007

Congressman Clay and ranking member Turner:

I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify before your committee. I am humbled and honored to present Ron Springs' and my story to you. Ron is unable to attend this hearing in person because he is still going through rehabilitation; but he is doing well and is on the road to recovery. He sends his regards. Therefore, I am here representing both of us and our newly formed foundation—the Everson Walls and Ron Springs “Gift for Life Foundation” (www.giftforlifefoundation.org).

Chairman Clay, before I get into my formal remarks, I must thank my friend Raynard Jackson (who is seated behind me and has been advising Ron & I on many issues involving our newly formed foundation).

I never, in my wildest dreams, thought you would ask me to participate in a hearing before the U.S. House of Representatives. As if that wasn't enough, for you to introduce a bill in congress named after Ron & I—man, that's some heady stuff. Even for someone who has played in and won a Super Bowl! So, I want to thank Raynard for introducing me to you and I look forward to working with you in the area of organ donation. Now, to my formal remarks.

Winston Churchill once stated, “ To every man there comes a time when he is figuratively tapped on the shoulder and offered a chance to do a great and mighty thing, unique to him and fitted to his talents; what a tragedy if that moment finds him unprepared or unqualified for the moment that could be his finest hour.”

I am not a hero, nor have I sought the spotlight since my retirement from the NFL in 1993. But, I received my tap on the shoulder in 1981 when I met Ron Springs. We were on opposite sides of the ball—me on defense as a cornerback and he on offense as a running back with the Dallas Cowboys.

Ron was a very unique athlete. He had size, speed, and the intelligence it took to become a leader on and off the field for the Dallas Cowboys. I was able to relate to Ron not just on the field, but off the field as well. Our friendship was strengthened by our family's bonding with each other.

After Ron and I both retired from the NFL, the relationship between our families became stronger. There was Ron's wife Adriene, his son Shawn (who is a current member of the Washington Redskins), daughters Ayra and Ashley. There was my wife Shreill, daughter Charis and my son Cameron. There were good times all around-- during family vacations, cookouts, graduations, and Sunday dinners. It seemed as if life couldn't get any better.

Remember, I played in the NFL for thirteen years. I can say I have been associated with some of the most intelligent, respected, and talented individuals known in the world of sports..

I played with such great teams as the Cowboys in the 1980s and I was a member of Giants Super Bowl XXV championship team 1990. I realized how important teamwork was as a player and I have always tried to transfer that from on the field to off the field. I learned those lessons from playing for great coaches such as the great Eddie Robinson from Grambling State University, Tom Landry of the Dallas Cowboys, and Bill Parcells of the New York Giants. But I also learned much more from my fellow soldiers that fought in the trenches with me. Ron Springs was one of those fellow soldiers.

Ron had been diagnosed with diabetes years ago, but the disease became more acute with time. He had been placed on national transplant waiting list in 2004. His health was challenged by chronic kidney disease. There was failing eye sight, lack of circulation to his limbs, and ultimately kidney failure. One of the strongest athletes I have ever known began to show weaknesses that could not be imagined a few years earlier.

I, like most people, was very naïve about the symptoms of chronic kidney disease. I was fortunate that diabetes did not run in my family. Because of the many afflictions affecting my friend, I began to take a crash course on the subject of chronic kidney disease. I was very surprised at what I found out.

There are millions of Americans that are afflicted with chronic kidney disease, but minorities are affected disproportionately.

You have limited choices when you are afflicted with chronic kidney disease. One option is to start taking insulin, another option is to take dialysis. Dialysis is an extremely invasive procedure. In Ron Springs' case, it was more like a slow death. The process includes having all of your blood extracted from your body, filtered, and then inserted back into your body. It is not only invasive, but it is time consuming as well. Each session lasts 4-5 hours a day, and Ron Springs would endure this procedure three times a week, for three and a half years. Unfortunately, during that time, Ron not only lost feeling in his legs, but his right foot and left toes were amputated. There is another option that is only for the fortunate, and that is to undergo a kidney transplant procedure. There are two types of kidney transplants. One is to receive the organ from a cadaver, the other, and more favorable procedure, is to receive the organ from a living donor.

Fortunately for Ron Springs, I volunteered to be his favorable option. After a barrage of tests, it turned out that I was a perfect match to become his living organ donor. On February 28th, Ron and I underwent a successful living organ donor transplant procedure. Because of this, Ron has no more dialysis treatments, and has a chance at a better quality of life. Although he has a long way to go, as far as rehabilitation is concerned, our lives and our families lives are much richer because of my decision to lay down my life for my fellow human being.

Finally, Congressman Clay, Ron and I established the “Gift for Life Foundation” to help us educate the public about the issue of organ donation. We want to educate the public on the need, the process, and the benefits of organ donation. There is a lot of misinformation surrounding organ donation that needs to be dealt with. Minorities, especially Blacks and Latinos, are extremely hesitant to register for organ donation. Some of it stems from religious reasons and others from some of the terrible things our government has done in the past, like the Tuskegee experiments.

N.F.L. Commissioner Roger Goodell and Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones have pledged their support to us and our foundation to take our message across the country. They both have submitted letters of support to you for inclusion in the official record of this hearing. I would like to ask your continued support and personal involvement along with ranking member Congressman Michael Turner from Ohio.

We want to work closely with the Department of Health and Human Services, as well as the pharmaceutical industry to help us take our campaign nationally. Any help you can provide in meeting with these organizations would be greatly appreciated.

When I received this tap on the shoulder, what a tragedy it would have been if I was unqualified or unprepared for the moment that could be my finest hour. I thank God that I was able to give and extend the life of my dear friend, Ron Springs. Of all the success I have obtained both on and off the field, being used as a vessel of God is by far my finest hour. Thank you again for inviting me to participate in this hearing and I look forward to your questions.