Colchester • Colch

Colchester Eye Care Commemorates 20 Years

by Julianna Roche

What stands out most about Dr. Tom Dempsey is just how much he appreciates life. Sitting backwards on a swiveling stool in his exam room at Colchester Eye Care, the optometrist explained the reason why: in addition to being a 13-year cancer survivor, 21 years ago. he also received a liver transplant after suffering from an autoimmune liver disease.

'I got through the first two big ones," he said. "I've been a host of a series of medical problems, but I'm so fortunate to be here.

According to Dempsey, he and his wife Wendy even waited until they knew if he would be healthy enough to get married, which he was eight months after his transplant in 1996.

Now a father of two daughters, Dempsey continues trying to spread the importance of organ donation to others.

One of the more poignant things I can tell people is that not only would I not be here if it weren't for my organ donor, [my daughters] wouldn't be here," he said.

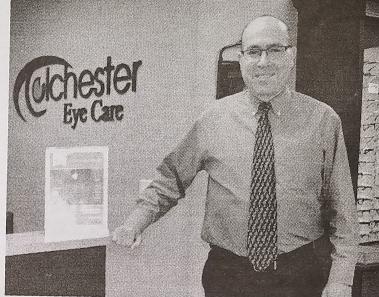
In 1997, Dempsey was healthy enough to open his first eye care practice in Colchester which will celebrate its 20th anniversary next Saturday, April 22. Dempsey also owns a practice in Hebron.

"It's hard for me to believe it's been two decades," he said, adding "the coolest thing about it" is that so many of his patients have been with him since the practice first started.

"They all have a special place in my heart because they grew with me," he furthered. "[Of] the kids I saw then, some of those babies are in college now. Some toddlers are out of college; some even have their own babies now.

Just one example, Dempsey said, is a patient he has seen since she was 3 years old. Today, she's out of college and working at Hartford Hospital.

"I've been really sentimental these last couple weeks because of the 20th [anniversary]," he explained, adding he was reminiscing how as a toddler, the patient used to sit on the stool in the examination room and spin in circles.



Colchester Eye Care, owned by Dr. Tom Dempsey, will celebrate its 20tl anniversary on Saturday, April 22.

"It was so darn cute," he said. "I would ask her politely not to. She'd give me a mischievous smile and then just get back on and keep doing it.'

Dempsey also recalled a brother and sister who had their first appointment in 2003.

"She punched me and he kicked me," he laughed, adding that the daughter is now married and when the son comes in for appointment, Dempsey always asks him "Are you sure you're not going to kick me now?"

"Stories like that keep a smile on our face," he said.

But one patient who holds an extra-special place in Dempsey's heart is Jennifer Neri-Lorette, who was killed in a sledding accident

when she was 12 years old.
"She would sit in the chair and say 'Tell me your story; tell me the one about your liver," Dempsey explained. "I remember her banging her hands on the chair saying, 'I want to donate organs!"

Neri-Lorette was just 9 years old at the time. "The thing I remember most about Jen is that she wasn't just bright in the academic sense, but she would keep adults reeling because she had one-liners," Dempsey said. "She was hysterical, such a good kid.

When she died, Jennifer's mother Lorraine

Tierney made her wish a reality and her pan creas, liver and corneas were ultimately do

"You'd think after x number of years, you'd have met all the good people," the optometrist continued, "[but] I keep meeting nice people, good people, and friendly people every single

day."
Over the last 20 years, Dempsey said the biggest change to the practice has been advancing technologies, which include diagnostics such as corneal mapping, digital retinal imaging and optical coherence tomography (OCT) - which acts similarly to an ultrasound by using light to achieve higher resolution pictures of the structural layers of the back of the eye.

He added that the practice has also started using Prokera, a biologic corneal bandage device used to heal and treat eye diseases such as keratitis, common dry eye, herpetic ulcers and neurotrophic corneas.

"[It's] a brand new technology we're way ahead of the curve on," he said.

However, it's not just the advanced technology that makes both Colchester Eye Care and Hebron Eye Care so successful. For Dempsey, it comes down to family practice.

The definition of family practice was my wife and I, and only my wife and I with one part-time person," he said, adding his wife's mother also helped on Saturdays when they first

'And then we grew and grew, but we still kept that family feel which we're so proud of," he continued, adding that he considers all 19 of the practice's employees as part of his family.

the practice's employees as part of his family.
"I think we picked the right place to be. I think we picked the right people. We hire carefully and have the right staff," Dempsey furthered. "I'm blessed and fortunate I have the best support system of family, friends [and] staff. ... Who's luckier than me?"

On Saturday, April, 22, Colchester Eye Care will celebrate its 20th anniversary from noon-3 p.m. at 163 Broadway St. in Colchester.

The celebration will include a performance by William J. Johnston Middle School's jazz band, a fashion show by East Hampton's Red Door Boutique, a bounce house, free hot dogs, popcorn and drinks, sales, raffle prizes and give-



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