

It's never a waste of time to save a life

By Gracie Bonds Staples -The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Anthony Stokes, 17, was killed in a car crash during a police chase Tuesday night. The teen set off an international debate in 2013 when doctors decided his age and brushes with the law disqualified him for a heart transplant. They reversed their decision after much public outcry. So Anthony Stokes is dead.



Police say the 17-year-old lost control of his car during a high speed chase, plowed into another car and a SunTrust Bank sign. They say he was a suspect in an attempted burglary in which he shot at an 81-year-old woman.

When they cut him out of the black Honda Accord on GA. 9 Tuesday night, he was dead. The driver of the other car was uninjured. The pedestrian Stokes hit, 33-year-old Clementina Hernandez, was in stable condition North Fulton Hospital. Thank God.

Now we're left to remember Anthony, the troubled kid who sparked an international debate after media reports that Children's Healthcare of Atlanta at Egleston had not put him on a transplant list for a heart in August 2013.

It was the thinking at the time that he was a bad candidate for the organ because his life, up to that point, suggested he would be "uncompliant" in treatment and had had brushes with the law.

"It just seemed they decided he's a troublemaker, and that's not true," the teen's mother, Melencia Hamilton said then.

Whether it was true or not, this is what I know for sure: Love covers a multitude of sin. It thinks no evil, especially when it comes to our children.

Sure it makes sense not to sweat the small stuff. If we didn't, we'd all be mad. But overlooking every wrong a kid commits is, well, asking for trouble.

All of us have watched with horror as the opposite has played out. Remember Joyce Hardin Garrard?

Garrard went so far as to run her 9-year-old granddaughter to her death for telling a lie. She was convicted last month and is awaiting sentencing in Alabama.

Garrard it seems is the embodiment of the idiom love you to death. But we also "love to death" when we refuse to discipline our children, when we don't allow them to feel the consequences of their actions.

Having said that, I don't agree with dozens of Facebook posters that Anthony's new heart was a waste. I believed two years ago he deserved that second chance and I still do.

He was only 15 and suffering from dilated cardiomyopathy, in which the heart's main pumping chamber, the left ventricle, fails to pump enough blood. He deserved a new heart and not even his last Facebook post — a selfie of him holding a gun — or the attempted burglary should change that.

As a mother of two, I can't help but stand with Melencia Hamilton, to look beyond any fault and see the need. That's what love does.

When several civil rights organizations and critics accused CHOA of rejecting him because of his age, race and run-ins with the law, the hospital thankfully changed course and agreed to put him on the transplant list. Seven days later, Anthony got his new heart.

That was less than two years ago. Two years.

A spokeswoman for the hospital told me she could not provide any additional information about this tragic situation. "We are deeply saddened by this loss," she said.

Me too, because another kid is dead. And what do we do? Unleash our Judgment, forgetting this could be us, it could be our kid. **If** you think it couldn't, think again.

Mark Bell, president of Justice Speaks, a civil rights advocacy organization, championed Anthony's' cause, speaking on behalf of the family. Bell was hoping for a different outcome but he has no regrets. His goal was to help save a life.

Here's what's most troubling to me. What if any impact might this have for the next troubled kid who finds himself in need of an organ? Will people remember Anthony and refuse to help? Should they?

I put those questions to Dr. Arthur Caplan, director of the division of medical ethics at the New York University Medical School.

"The fact that he died is tragic but it wasn't anything you could predict at the time," he said. "He died under terrible circumstances but all you had was a kid who was a pain in the neck. It doesn't mean he shouldn't have a transplant."

If you transplant any teenager — black or white, rich or poor — the chances for bad outcomes increase, Caplan said. "Some of them will probably die under the influence, some don't take their medicine, some of them will commit crimes so we are always cutting them a bit more slack," he said. "**If** you wanted to transplant people who didn't get into trouble, you wouldn't transplant teenagers. You'd take church deacons, nuns and maybe the ethicist like me."

It's not unusual, in fact, to transplant prisoners and it's right to do so.

"I know it's unpopular but medicine takes on all comers, sinners and saints," said Caplan. "That's the medical ethics that's been in place for a long time and I wouldn't change it even if it's not always popular."

Well, I got my answer and, boy, am I relieved.