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Young blood helps change law

By **RODRIGO ZAMITH**, Star Tribune

June 30, 2008

Joe Gibson was prepared to bleed to save lives ... before being told he couldn't.

After a long football practice a couple of years ago, Gibson, then 15, decided to honor his grandfather -- who had leukemia -- by donating blood at a drive in his high school's commons.

Although he felt great and was in better shape than many around him, Gibson was denied when he tried to sign up. The law said he was too young. So the Blooming Prairie teenager went to the Legislature to persuade its members to change what he said was "a silly law."

Starting today, 16-year-old Minnesotans looking to donate blood may do so, as long as they have parental consent and don't receive compensation.

Gibson had been turned away because a state law prevented anybody younger than 17 from donating blood. Outraged, he immediately began researching the risks of donating blood as a young teenager. After a couple of weeks of looking at the websites of the Mayo Clinic and the University of Minnesota, Gibson spoke with experts and crafted a report outlining his findings.

He got 80 signatures from classmates and neighbors.

He then presented the report to state Rep. Patti Fritz, DFL-Faribault. Although he expected her to brush him aside, she drove to Blooming Prairie to discuss his findings.

"She just came down and said 'Let's make it happen.'" Gibson said. "Right there, in a bakery [in Blooming Prairie], we started working on the wording."

The two began crafting the bill in the spring of 2006, and Gov. Tim Pawlenty signed it into law this spring.

"It took a while, but that's just the nature of those things," Gibson said. "We tried to get it into the special session last year, but we couldn't. But we finally got it in the beginning of the session this year, and it swept through."

After a brief stop at the Senate Health, Housing and Family Security Committee, the bill passed the Senate and House unanimously, just one month after its introduction.

"It was some really important legislation, and there were precedents," Gibson said.

According to the American Red Cross, 20 states now allow 16-year-olds to donate blood with parental consent. Two others, Kansas and Oregon, don't even require consent, and California allows 15-year-olds to donate with parental consent.

The Red Cross also said that only 38 percent of people are eligible to donate and that only 4 to 8 percent of those actually do. During summer months, the agency receives half its normal number of high school donors.

Average kid, high aspirations

After working with the American Red Cross for two years, Gibson was offered a position on its board of directors for the North Central chapter. But at the end of the day, he still considers himself a normal kid.

"I still go home and throw on the jeans and T-shirt and hang out with my friends," Gibson said.

He also plays paintball, runs on his high school's track and cross-country teams and even sleeps "from time to time."

"He's an above-average student that is very active in the things he believes in," said Blooming Prairie High School Principal Barry Olson. "He found a passion with this legislation ... and everybody's proud of him."

Gibson said he is looking forward to attending college, possibly at nearby St. Olaf and wants to be a lawyer. He also said he hopes to continue to work with the Red Cross for the rest of his life.

He has taken his calling to a new level by crafting "Club 25," a new initiative by the American Red Cross to keep young people involved by having them donate blood 25 times before they turn 25. He has used Facebook and MySpace pages to advertise the program.

"Getting the youth involved is my mission," Gibson said. "I just wanted to change something that wasn't right. Really, that's all it takes."

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