

# THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

## SUNDAY

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# LOCAL

## Huntington man's final ride will be in Rose Parade

Organ donor's image on float.

Tom Zech is all set for his next ride to raise awareness about organ donation.

An avid off-roader, Zech twice crossed the country on behalf of the group A Ride Across America, taking turns with a team of volunteers aboard all-terrain vehicles to draw attention to recipients on waiting lists and the need for donors.

The trip he'll make New Year's Day is much shorter but has a higher profile - down Colorado Boulevard in Pasadena for the Rose Parade.

The Huntington Beach man will be honored on the Donate Life float in the Tournament of Roses with his image on a florigraph, a portrait made from plant-based materials.



**THERESA WALKER**  
STAFF WRITER

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# DONOR

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It will be a bittersweet moment for family and friends who plan to be in the stands.

Zech died unexpectedly at 54 from a severe asthma attack in September 2013. As he desired, his organs and tissues were harvested – to the benefit of dozens of people.

He became a dedicated supporter of organ donation in the late 1990s after a relative benefited from a kidney transplant.

Besides participating in A Ride Across America in 2004 and 2006, he also volunteered to help decorate past years' floats with Donate Life, the national registry for organ and tissue donation.

Jean Zech, his wife of 24 years, doesn't recall whether her husband ever went to see the parade. She has never been. That will change Jan. 1.

"I'm not a parade person," says Jean Zech, a school lunch lady who lives in the same Huntington Beach home where she and Tom raised their four children.

"But I'm going because he'll be in it."

## GENEROUS WITH HIS TIME

In all, Tom Zech's unselfishness has prolonged and enhanced the lives of more than 40 people: His heart, liver, two kidneys and tissue went to people in California on a waiting list. One of his lungs and his corneas were donated to research.

Organ donation is a family affair with the Zechs.

Zech's brother-in-law Kevin Monroe nominated him for the floragraph tribute. Monroe, 63, had given a kidney to his older brother, Elliott Monroe, in 1998 and then became involved with Donate Life.

The Monroe men and



ED CRISOSTOMO, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

**Jean Zech touches up a floragraph of her husband, Tom, for the Donate Life float in the 2016 Rose Parade.**

Zech, an avid outdoorsman, were close. They'd go off-roading on dirt bikes and all-terrain vehicles regularly with family and friends in the high desert, calling themselves The Calico Gang.

Once a year, they'd head to Utah for the Mountain Man Marathon, a rugged four-day ride on ATVs. Zech rode fast and hard, at times so far ahead of his friends he'd be asleep atop his four-wheeler by the time they caught up with him.

"He wanted to play," Monroe says, "and he wanted to have fun."

But it was on his way back from a Utah trip that Zech and another friend in a truck were caught in a sandstorm. Zech had an asthma attack on the road, and then another the night he got home. He died at Fountain Valley Hospital just days later.

Monroe, who lives in Lakewood, founded A Ride Across America with a third brother, Greg Monroe. The group made three trips – in 2004, 2006 and 2008 – with volunteers like Zech who rode neon green ATVs. Along the way, they'd pay hospital visits to people waiting for a transplant and do news interviews.

Zech participated in the first two rides and would have gone on the third but couldn't get off work from his job as a local truck driv-

er.

What Kevin Monroe did for his brother – who lived another three years after his transplant – had inspired Zech to register as an organ donor and support the cause.

More than once on the trips he made, Zech would give Monroe a hug and a thank you for letting him come along. The rides were filled with the jokes Zech told, the pranks he pulled, and the kindness he showed to friends and strangers alike.

"Everybody that met that guy," says Monroe, "just fell in love with him."

## ONE LAST LOOK

Zech's story stood out when administrators with the Dignity Memorial network of memorial parks and mortuaries in Orange County decided to sponsor a floragraph on the 2016 Donate Life float.

"He kind of just reminds me of a silent hero," says Tiffany Gallarzo, vice president of family services at Fairhaven Memorial Park and Mortuary, who served as liaison with the family.

As the image for the floragraph, Jean Zech chose a casual photo that Monroe snapped at a New York City restaurant during their 2006 cross-country ride: Zech stares at the camera, a smile about to break beneath his Fu Manchu mustache.

The floragraphs are

created a couple of months before the parade. Zech's was put together by two volunteers at the Placentia office of OneLegacy, a regional organ procurement agency of Donate Life.

When the family was asked if they'd like to add the final touches, filling in his eyebrows, Jean Zech chose a special day to do it: Nov. 7, her husband's birthday.

"I couldn't find a better way to honor him on his birthday than that."

OneLegacy volunteers Lynne Frutchey and Melinda Jeffries, both elementary school teachers in Fullerton, spent about 20 painstaking hours in their off time creating the sepia-toned, 15-inch circular floragraph.

Their palette: two types of coffee grounds and farina (similar to Cream of Wheat) dyed with spices that included cumin, curry and cinnamon.

They deftly captured the cleft in Zech's chin, the crow's feet by his eyes, the wrinkles next to his mouth.

"From all the stories we were told and that we read, he just seemed to be a person full of life and giving of himself," Frutchey says. "His laugh lines and his eyes were just really wonderful."

But because of design restrictions, Zech's blue eyes are brown in the floragraph. (Frutchey and Jeffries hope to be able to change the eyes to blue once the parade is over and the floragraph is framed to present to the family.)

Jean Zech noticed the eye discrepancy right away at the gathering on Zech's 57th birthday in a reception room at Westminster Memorial Park, where he is buried, to complete the floragraph.

Still, the likeness, which smelled enticingly like a spice cabinet, pleased her even as it brought tears to her eyes.

"They did a good job."