

Joe's Story

One teen's story - Idea to law

Joe Gibson is proof that just because you're not old enough to vote doesn't mean you can't change state law. It just takes following your beliefs and not giving up — no matter how many times you hear the word “no.”

The Blooming Prairie teenager was the driving force behind a law that allows 16-year-olds to donate blood with parental consent.

Throughout the process, Gibson didn't relent even though it took nearly two years for his idea to become law.

“I'd like to, hopefully, set a precedent for other youth in Minnesota and everywhere else that you can make a difference,” he said on March 18, 2008, as he watched Gov. Tim Pawlenty sign the law lowering the minimum age requirement for blood donation.

“It's a great way to give back to the community. I'm just trying to do the right thing with this. I believe it'll really help,” Gibson said. “There's such a blood shortage in the United States and Minnesota.”

It was Joe's bloodlines that drove him throughout the process. He told the House Health and Human Services Committee in a calm, confident manner about his grandfather's 18-month battle with leukemia before passing away and how important blood donations were to his quality of life.

“During the time he was fighting, he received several blood transfusions, as well as several surgeries that required blood transfusions,” Gibson said.

“I was very close to my grandfather, and I did notice that after transfusions he would have such a better state of living. It helped him so much with his mobility and everything. It was a small miracle for him.”

One day Gibson was leaving his high school locker room after football practice, and wanted to participate in a blood drive being held at his school.

“I thought, ‘Hey, this is a great idea. I should do it. My grandfather needed it and I should donate blood,’” he said. “I was 15, about 160 pounds and running 5 miles a day with football, cross-country and all that stuff.”

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Photo by Andrew VonBank

Joe Gibson testifies before the House Health and Human Services Committee about his idea to let 16-year-olds donate blood as Rep. Patti Fritz, the bill's House sponsor, looks on.

However, state law at that time required a person be at least age 17 to donate.

“It didn’t make any sense to me,” Gibson said. “I looked into it a lot more, and I put together a petition, which I had about 70 of my classmates and a few adults sign.”

Idea begins its journey

Gibson sent the petition to Rep. Patti Fritz (DFL-Faribault), who is a licensed practical nurse and represented the area that included Blooming Prairie.

She got back to him “within a couple of days,” he said, and the pair began to work together on the issue, such

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as meeting with representatives of the American Red Cross, Mayo Clinic and Memorial Blood Centers. Some pediatricians (doctors specializing in diseases of young people) had concerns over lowering the donation age to 15. In a lesson of compromise, Gibson suggested 16.

The bill was introduced in the House as HF1066 on Feb. 19, 2007, with Fritz

as its sponsor. One year later, during the second year of the biennium, Sen. Kathy Sheran (DFL-Mankato) sponsored the Senate version, SF2471, on Feb. 12, 2008.

The bills breezed through the committee process, approved by the House Health and Human Services Committee and the Senate Health, Housing and Family Security Committee



Photo by Andrew VonBank

Gov. Tim Pawlenty hands Joe Gibson the pen he used to sign SF2471 into law on March 18, 2008, as Rep. Patti Fritz, left, and Sen. Kathy Sheran look on.

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without objection. The Senate version was passed 64-0 by the full Senate on March 6, 2008, and 132-0 by the House one week later. Gibson was in the House Gallery to see the House vote.

Gibson, an aspiring attorney, had a former top legislator in his corner.

Former House Speaker Steve Sviggum sat next to Joe at the health committee hearing, and cited the good reasons for the bill.

Sviggum said there are about 4,000 blood drives annually in the state, 330 of which are in high schools.

"High school juniors and seniors are very, very good at getting their colleagues and friends to donate," Sviggum said.

DFL and Republican House members gave kudos to Gibson for his determination.

"What a great effort on your behalf to really show everybody in this state what government is like when it works, when people have good ideas and they bring them to people who are willing to work on their cause," said Rep. Brad Finstad (R-Comfrey). "Congratulations."

Rep. Neva Walker (DFL-Mpls) encouraged Gibson to keep fighting for his beliefs.

"I remember being 16, and I didn't think like you even though I knew the Capitol was here. For myself, I was just like, 'OK, I can get my friends to donate blood and I'll wait until I turn 17.' Hopefully, this won't be the last time that you come to change our laws and improve our government. Maybe, in a few more years you'll come as a member."

True or False

1. It is legal in Minnesota for 15-year-olds to donate blood.
2. Steve Sviggum, who favored Joe's idea, is a former governor.
3. Joe's bill, HF1066, became law in 2007.
4. Joe's idea came from a desire to help his ill grandfather.

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