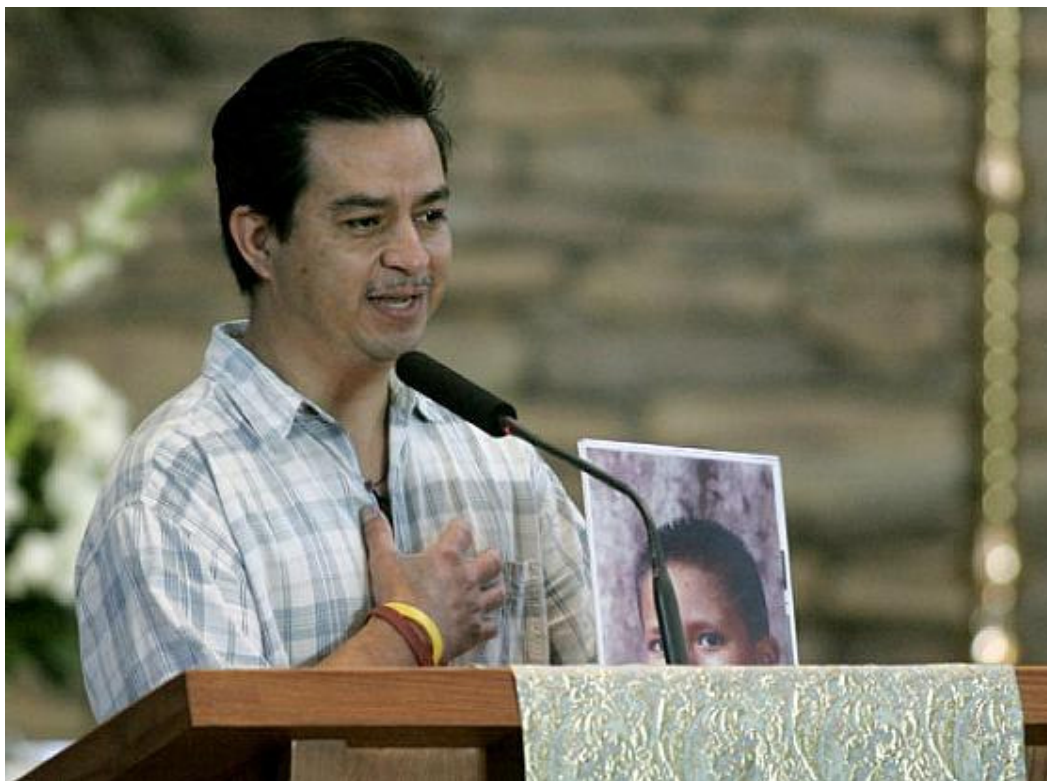


Father appeals for Latino marrow donors

Each year about half of minority patients needing a bone marrow transplant can't find a compatible donor, recruitment campaign says.

By JEFF COLLINS The Orange County Register
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ORANGE – Maria Ferrer inserted a cotton swab into her mouth, rubbed it around the inside of her right cheek, then stowed the "tissue sample" into cardboard folder.



PLEA: Miguel Garcia explains the plight of his son Christopher, 7, who needs a bone marrow donor, to the congregation of La Purisima Church in Orange. He is holding his son's photograph.

With that, Ferrer, 41, joined dozens of others who signed up Sunday as bone marrow donors following Mass at La Purisima Catholic Church.

The parishioners responded to a Los Angeles County father's plea for help finding a cure for his 7-year-old son's leukemia --and for others who need bone marrow transplants to beat a host of life-threatening diseases.

"Giving bone marrow isn't as complicated as people think," Miguel Garcia, 40, said during a Spanish-language Mass attended by more than 1,000 worshippers. " ... (And) it's something that could save my son's life."

Garcia's appeals, repeated during the 10 a.m. and noon Masses, were the latest in a nationwide campaign to recruit more minority bone marrow donors.

Minorities make up just a fourth of the total donor pool, making it harder for them to find a compatible match when they need it, according to the National Marrow Donor Program. And some minorities have greater diversity of tissue types, narrowing the field.



CHRISTOPHER: Christopher Garcia, 7, of Maywood, has Leukemia and needs a bone marrow transplant. He is shown playing ball in 2007, and in 2005 in inset.

"If you're a Caucasian in the U.S., and you're looking for a donor, you have (millions) of potential people to choose from," said Dr. Dennis Confer, the donor program's chief medial officer. "If you're a Latino and you're looking for a donor, you have about 500,000."

Because tissue types are inherited, patients are more likely to match someone from their own race or ethnicity. Adding more donors from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds increases the likelihood that all patients will find a match that won't be rejected by the body's immune system.

According to the donor program, 10,000 Americans need a marrow transplant each year. Orange County gets more than 300 requests for bone marrow transplants a year, and is only able to service about 80 to 100 in a year, according to the southwest regional

office for the marrow donor program.

There was no local breakdown for minorities available.

Garcia has been making appeals like this off and on for three years, soon after doctors determined that a transplant is the only way to cure his son's leukemia and release the boy from periodic hospitalizations and painful treatments. He's had a brush with death.

In the past three years, Garcia believes he may have signed up about 1,000 people to join the National Marrow Donor registry. But he has yet to find a match for his energetic first grader, who loves playing T-ball in the park and watching "Camp Lazlo" cartoons.

While some patients get a match from relatives, seven out of every 10 patients can't, according to the donor program.

Garcia, 40, quickly volunteered to be tested. So did his wife, Maria, 38, and their other son, Hector, 18. Miguel and Maria's brothers and sisters were tested as well, including Miguel's brother and three sisters in Jalisco, Mexico.

"They didn't match," he said. Three years of searching the National Marrow Donor registry and three years of donor drives failed to find a compatible donor as well. Garcia worries that Latinos are reluctant to volunteer as donors, and he's had to parry myths that donors could end up paralyzed or disabled. As he walks the streets, he keeps imagining that anyone he sees could be the one who could cure his son.

But worshippers at La Purisima showed little reluctance to join the donor register. Eighty five people signed up to be potential donors on Sunday. Of those, 71 were Latino.

"Perhaps you can save a life by giving a part of yourself," said Laura Mendoza, 38, of Orange.

"It's important that we help," added Ernestina Frias, 32. "One day, this could happen to me too."

Register staff writer Amy Taxin contributed to this report.

Contact the writer: 714-796-7734 or jcollins@ocregister.com