

Bone Marrow Match Found for Ailing Black Teen, But Countless Others Aren't So Lucky

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It was a close call for De'Sha Woods.

A bone marrow match had been found, and it seemed that the St. Louis teen's struggle with acute myeloid leukemia would finally be over. Then, for reasons unknown, the donor withdrew.



Last week, 17-year-old De'Sha Woods (above), was nursing disappointment while undergoing chemotherapy treatment for acute myeloid leukemia, hoping a new bone marrow donor would appear on the horizon. On Monday, it was learned a new donor had been found for her, and surgery is scheduled for April 24.

Last week, De'Sha, 17, was nursing disappointment while undergoing chemotherapy treatment and hoping a new donor would appear on the horizon. On Monday, it was learned a new donor had been found for her, and surgery is scheduled for April 24.

De'Sha's story had a happy ending, but there are families of thousands of men, women and children searching the National Marrow Donor Program registry each day hoping to find the match that will mean the difference between life and death.

According to the NMDP, more than 80 percent of the black patients seeking a donor will not find one, primarily because there are not enough black donors on the registry.

There are nearly 7 million people on the registry, but only 515,000 are black.

"Particularly in African-Americans, there really is a large issue because of all the diverse tissue types. It's possible that a Caucasian could be a match, but the likelihood is you find the best match within your race," said Regan Hall Reinerth, manager of membership marketing for the National Marrow Donor Program.

Reinerth **told BlackAmericaWeb.com** the availability rate of potential matches is 70 percent for whites and 50 percent or less for all minority racial groups.

People leave the registry for a number of reasons. Sometimes they develop illnesses that make them ineligible to donate; sometimes they move and forget to provide the registry with their new contact information; some people decide the program is no longer a good match for them and some people simply age out. Donors must be between the ages of 18 and 60.

The reason De'Sha's first donor withdrew could have been any of those reasons. Families are not told why a donor drops out of the program, Reinerth said. But the sense of urgency

in finding a match was especially great in De'sha's case, according to her mother, Delores Woods.

Woods said De'Sha has an extremely rare case of acute myeloid leukemia, and most standard chemotherapy drugs have not helped her. She has tried three different chemo drugs before finding one that worked, along with an experimental drug that also seems to have helped.

"But she has maxed out on the amount of the (experimental) drug she can take and is down to one chemotherapy drug she can use," Woods **told BlackAmericaWeb.com** last week.

Bone marrow transplants can offer hope for patients who come out of remission after having been treated with chemo previously. In those cases, chemo no longer has the same effectiveness. De'Sha was first diagnosed with cancer in March 2006. By the following January, she was in remission, but by fall, the cancer was back.

Bone marrow registry drives were set up in an effort to find a match for De'Sha, said Rick Mason, a senior account executive for NMDP, who travels in the St. Louis area, throughout the state of Missouri and neighboring states recruiting volunteers. To find a registry drive in your area, he said, just go to www.marrow.org.

De'Sha has gotten into the recruiting act, volunteering to be the face of the NMDP's "Be the One to Save a Life" campaign, which kicks off in April, aimed at persuading black Americans, Hispanics and Chinese Americans in Houston, Charlotte, Los Angeles and Kansas City to sign up for the registry.

"Marrow-thons" are being held on radio stations in select cities to promote upcoming registry drives, and the campaign will be taken to historically black colleges and universities as well, Reinerth said.

In May, a "Thanks, Mom" drive will be launched in more than 700 locations, with an aim to sign up 46,000 registry members in two weeks -- compared to the average of about 3,000 a month.

"De'Sha has offered to help with that, too," Reinerth said.

To register, just contact the NMDP, which will send out a kit that includes a cotton swab used to wipe the inside of the cheek. The swab is then dropped into a bag and mailed back to the program in a postage-paid envelope.

Once someone is found to be a match, he or she is contacted by the program and walked through the donor process. Before any marrow is withdrawn, Reinerth said, there is testing to make sure a person who appears to be a match is actually healthy enough to donate.

"It's quick and easy and simple to do," she said, but cautioned, "Once you're on the registry, you must be committed. We don't want to give patients false hope."