

'Truly amazing gift' proves lifesaver for baby

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MAPLE SHADE — Marilyn and Sal Morales won't soon forget the gift that their baby daughter received right before her first birthday last month.

The gift will save the little girl's life, her mom said.

Just before Isabella Morales celebrated her first birthday, her parents learned doctors had found a bone-marrow donor for her.

"It's a godsend," said her mom. "Words cannot express how we feel about this person who so selflessly gave of themselves so our baby can live."

In October, Isabella was diagnosed with juvenile myelomonocytic leukemia, or JMML, a rare form of childhood cancer. She was just 7 months old and has been fighting for her life since.

Her best chance at survival is the bone marrow transplant that is now scheduled for April 24 at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. She had to be at least a year old to receive the transplant and a match had to be found.

Her closest relatives were not matches.

The National Marrow Donor Program matched Isabella with an anonymous donor.

The baby's friends and families also helped her cause by holding two donor drives in hopes of finding a match. They worried it would be difficult to find a match for Isabella, who is Hispanic, because only about 20 percent of national donors are minorities.

Those tested at the donor drives will be entered into a national registry and could be matched with others in need.

"We had such a good response and we are so grateful," Marilyn Morales said.

Since being diagnosed, Isabella has spent long stretches in the hospital, multiple rounds of chemotherapy and numerous blood transfusions. At one point, doctors told her family the baby may not live through the weekend. Her cancer cannot be stopped by chemotherapy, but she received the treatment to keep it from progressing.

Isabella recently had a part of her spleen removed to prepare for the transplant and will begin a 10-day chemotherapy treatment tomorrow.

Despite everything, Marilyn Morales said Isabella is doing great and remains a happy baby. She hopes to one day meet the donor who is helping her daughter.

“We won't find out anything about the donor for a year. It's all confidential, but we want to thank them from the bottom of our hearts,” she said. “It's a truly amazing gift.”