

For one needing bone marrow transplant, time weighs heavy

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Korey Pierce is in many respects an average 20 year old, except for the fact that the last year of his life he has been battling aplastic anemia.

Pierce was first diagnosed just two days after his birthday. Since that time he has undergone numerous tests and screenings, though with all efforts failing he has spent the last several month searching for a compatible bone marrow donor. It is a long process many patients would characterize as nerve-wracking and grueling.

It all began last year, in the weeks leading up to his diagnosis Pierce was battling what he thought was a throat infection. But when he woke up one date with blood in his mouth he decided to see the doctor.

Doctors at the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center diagnosed the ailment and recommended that Pierce begin a treatment referred to as ATG.

Aplastic anemia is a blood disorder, where the body is tricked into attacking itself. The result of which is almost always a weakened immune system along with a dwindling of the bone marrow.

Pierce's levels have gotten so low he must travel weekly to Dartmouth Hitchcock to receive blood transfusions and platelet injections. The treatment is maintaining Pierce, but doctors hope that a bone-marrow transplant will restore his system once again.

Over the course of his health struggles, Pierce has gained an inside look into the bone marrow donor process. In recent months, many in the area have become aware of bone marrow transplants and the need for donors thanks to the Save Giovanni's Friends Movement.

The movement was originally inspired when a 4-month-old from Belmont, Goivanni Guglielmo, was left clinging to life with his only hope resting with a transplant. His father, Michael Guglielmo, initiated a movement in his son's name that turned out to be one of the largest bone marrow donor movements in history. Already, nearly 14,000 new donors have been added to the registry thanks to the movement.

"Before (my illness) I didn't know what (a bone-marrow transplant) was. I donated blood once, but that was it," explained Pierce.



Courtesy Photo KOREY PIERCE trained at the New Hampshire Fire Academy before going to work for both the Ashland and Bridgewater Fire Departments.



Pierce said he saw the status of the state of the bone marrow registry before the movement began and it was a scary thing.

"I had it easy; all I had to do was sit and wait. I'm a very common (marrow to match)," said Pierce, continuing, "but for a lot of people it is pretty grueling and tough (to find a match)."

Even for someone who is supposed to be easy to match, like Pierce, there are no guarantees.

Courtesy Photo KOREY PIERCE battles a blaze in Thornton while he was 18 years old.

Originally, he was matched with five possible donors. However, four were ruled unsuitable because of other illnesses and the fifth had recently received a tattoo

so he too was no longer a candidate.

It was only recently that Pierce managed to find another match, though the donor will not be able to donate until June. And as he said, it is a long wait and a lot of treatments until then.

"There is not a lot you have to do, it's what everyone else has to do," said Pierce, explaining there is the initial hurdle to get people to sign up then there is the process of finding someone who is a match and will be able to donate.

Many who become donors are logged into the system for life, and it may be years before they are matched to a patient. In the mean time, life goes on.

This is why, Pierce says the Giovanni Movement is so important, at the very least it informs people about the need and the process.

"For a while people couldn't find a donor, but this movement will change that," said Pierce, explaining that many in the area are well aware of bone marrow transplants and how and why to become donors. At the very least they have heard about Giovanni.

This Thursday, Pierce's story will be tied into a donor drive held at the First Free Will Baptist Church in Ashland. That drive is sponsored by the Giovanni Movement and organized by local community members.

Though he has been unable to work for the past year because of the risk of infection, Pierce remains as a call firefighter on both the Ashland and Bridgewater Fire Departments. Over the course of his serve, Pierce has fought many fires and probably saved life or two.

He did get a job with Marine Patrol a week before he was diagnosed, but had to give it up because of his illness.

"The firefighting can be exciting, but it's helping people and the camaraderie of the department I like most. Right now I wish I could get up and go to work," Pierce said.