

Edmonds teens organize bone marrow drive

Marrow donor drive focuses on those of mixed race

By Eric Stevick, Herald Writer Tuesday, February 5, 2008



Melissa Jay, 18; Rachael Gary, 18; Rachel Cross, 17; and Alicia Castagno, 17, (left to right) of the Edmonds-Woodway Mixed Heritage Club solicit bone marrow donors between classes on Wednesday. The group is searching for donors who may potentially provide hard-to-find marrow matches.

EDMONDS -- Alicia Castagno wasn't allowed to register as a potential bone marrow donor the first time she wanted to help save someone's life.

She was 15 at the time and hoped to help another teen-ager who, like Castagno, was of Chinese and Italian descent.

The boy faced a life-threatening illness and needed a bone marrow transplant, but the National Marrow Donor Program's requirement that all donors be 18 to join its registry led Castagno to believe there was nothing she could do.

"He died," the Edmonds-Woodway High School senior said. "I really wanted to stop that from ever happening again."

Castagno later learned about a state law passed in 2000 that allows students 15 and older with parental permission to sign up as potential donors.

Castagno, now 17, has signed up with the American Bone Marrow Donor Registry, which accepts younger teens with parental permission. And roughly 90 classmates, parents and

others from south Snohomish County followed suit last week.

The EWHS Mixed Club, an organization for students of multiracial and mixed heritage, ran the bone marrow drive knowing that finding a match for patients of mixed race can be particularly difficult.

About one-quarter of those listed in the donor registry of the National Marrow Donor Program are racial minorities, with mixed-race people representing about 2 percent of the total, according to the Seattle-based MAVIN Foundation, which works on multiracial issues and helps recruit marrow donors.

At EWHS, the Mixed Club's goal was to help fill the void. It worked closely with the American Bone Marrow Donor Registry and Stevens Hospital in Edmonds.

The goal was to add 50 names to the registry. The students enlisted nearly twice that number and roughly half are minorities or of mixed race.

"It has exceeded our expectations," said Angela Bond, an EWHS counselor and club advisor.

The bone marrow drive left Thurston County resident Angela Tucker on the verge of tears. Tucker has been following bone marrow donor issues for many years and drove up Wednesday to help the EWHS students.

Tucker said the student-led bone marrow drive was the first for a high school in the state.

"I can't believe this is happening," she said. "It's just nice to see it happening, finally."

In 1999, her son, Alden, who was 15 at the time, had tried to see if he was a potential match for his friend, Michael Penon, who lived in Hawaii and was diagnosed with leukemia.

Both had black, Korean and Hispanic blood, but Penon was deemed too young under the national registry's policy.

So the Tuckers worked with the Legislature, which passed a law.

Tests eventually showed Alden Tucker's bone marrow didn't match and Penon died, but Tucker's efforts bolstered the opportunity for countless others to get help.

The EWHS donor drive wasn't just a matter of getting students, parents and other supporters to sign up. First, the students had to raise more than \$3,000 for registration costs, including kits and lab processing costs for the tissue tests of potential donors.

That meant a giant garage sale and other old-fashioned fundraising with lots of help from Stevens Hospital employees.

Students also spent three weekends raising public awareness for their cause at Alderwood mall. They signed up potential donors at the school on Wednesday and at the mall on Saturday.

Roosbeh Katiraie, 17, an EWHS senior, is of mixed race and registered as a bone marrow

donor. Katiraie identified his heritage as Mexican and Iranian.

"When you think about saving someone's life, I don't think it was an inconvenience," he said. "And there is such a need for mixed-race donors."