

## Saving Grand Prairie boy ranks high for ex-soldier

Iraq veteran saves sick teen with marrow transplant

12:00 AM CST on Tuesday, February 12, 2008

By DAVID FLICK / The Dallas Morning News

Christopher Saucedo served his country in Iraq, then gave life to a 14-year-old boy at home.

But the former Army sergeant, who now installs air conditioners in San Antonio, is surprised that people consider him a hero.

Facing television cameras Monday, moments after he met the Grand Prairie teen to whom he donated bone marrow, the 27-year-old Mr. Saucedo seemed shocked and a bit embarrassed at the attention.

"I wasn't expecting any of this," he said. "I'm very happy, excited, overjoyed."

More outgoing was Raquel Garay, 47, mother of Richard Garay, who was declared cured of a usually fatal blood disease because of Mr. Saucedo's donation.

As the two families prepared to meet in the lobby of the Bright Building at Children's Medical Center Dallas, Ms. Garay said she promised herself she would not cry – a promise that vanished within seconds after she hugged Mr. Saucedo.

"You're an angel with no wings," she told him. "But I'm sure if God would let me, I would put them on you. Thank you. My son is alive."

In autumn 2004, Ms. Garay first noticed that her son, who had always been healthy, was lethargic and had unexplained bruises.

Late one afternoon a few weeks later, a school official brought Richard home. He had collapsed.

Ms. Garay rushed him to the emergency room.

"They gave him tests, and then one doctor came into the room, and then another," she recalled. "When all these doctors start coming in, you know something is happening."



Richard Garay, 14, and ex-Army Sgt. Christopher Saucedo met at Children's Medical Center Dallas. Mr. Saucedo gave bone marrow to save Richard's life. Richard's mother, Raquel (left), hugged Mr. Saucedo's wife, Erica.

Her son had leukemia, they said, and two weeks to live at most.

The diagnosis was wrong – Richard had aplastic anemia, in which the immune system attacks the bone marrow.

And blood transfusions would keep him alive for months.

But if death was not quite so near, it seemed no less inevitable.

"Most children who have it don't live into adulthood," said Dr. Jennifer Cox, the hematologist who oversaw Richard's treatment.

Physicians tried to defeat the disease with a variety of strategies, including one in which cells from horse blood were injected into Richard's veins.

Nothing worked, and a transplant was ordered.

But tests on family members, which result in matches about a quarter of the time, were unsuccessful.

As a Hispanic, Richard faced additional odds, said Dr. Cox, an assistant professor at UT Southwestern Medical Center and a physician at Children's Medical Center.

"It's always harder for nonwhites," she said. "There are fewer donors, and you have more complex genetic histories."

Unknown at the time was that a matching donor had already signed up – and was serving in Iraq.

At the same time Richard was fighting for his life, Mr. Saucedo was stationed in central Baghdad – "10 minutes from everything," he said.

Mr. Saucedo was not always so far away. Back in San Antonio, he lived only blocks from Richard's grandmother.

"Whenever I visited, I may have passed by him," Ms. Garay said. "I think it shows that God wanted this to happen."

Mr. Saucedo declined to discuss his experiences in Iraq in detail.

Asked whether he saw much action, Mr. Saucedo replied only: "I saw my share."

Two years earlier, he had responded to a plea for blood marrow donors by signing up.

He said he did so for the same reason he joined the military.

"I figured if this was a way I could help somebody, I'd do it," he said.

In 2006, after leaving the Army, Mr. Saucedo was in the middle of installing an air-conditioning unit when he received a cellphone call.

"They told me I was a match," he said. "I was shocked. I was stunned."

He donated the marrow in April 2006, and it was transplanted into Richard.

It was not an easy process.

Ms. Garay said her son was in constant pain and for weeks lay hooked up to as many as seven machines.

"At one point, he wanted us to take away all the machines," she said. "He was just like any human being. He said, 'I just want to die.' "

But 17 days after the transfusion, his body started making white blood cells.

His blood type changed from A-positive to O-positive – the same as Mr. Saucedá's. His body was accepting the transplant.

Richard was not yet in the clear.

He spent two months in the hospital and 100 days confined to his home.

But today, Dr. Cox said, he is cured. He no longer even has to take medication.

Children's Medical Center, eager to promote the transplant program, arranged for the first meeting between Richard and Mr. Saucedá.

Richard is enjoying his newfound freedom. But even a day away from school has new meaning for him.

"I missed a lot of school when I was sick," he said. "But there were days when I'd rather be in school."

He has returned to his pre-illness interests of football, basketball and drawing. But he said simple things matter.

"I can be out with my friends now without a mask," he said.

Mr. Saucedá dismissed the pain that is an inevitable part of donating bone marrow.

"It was difficult," he said. "But life is difficult. It was well worth it, and I would do it again – several times."