

## Greece couple humbled to be called donors

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(February 26, 2008) — Jeannine and Bob DeRoo are, by their own account, an ordinary couple with no heroic aspirations.

They live in a two-story home in Greece, have five children, attend First Bible Baptist Church every Sunday and take camping trips in the summers.

Three years ago, when a friend from church needed a bone marrow transplant, both swabbed their cheeks and put their names on a national registry, in case either was a match.



What they didn't know at the time were the lottery-like odds that their marrow would help. After no matches were found for their friend, they forgot about the registry. Then, in a rare coincidence or by some divine intervention, they received reminders.

In the summer, Jeannine got the call first. She was a possible match for a woman who needed a transplant; would she be willing to donate? Jeannine was surprised, a little shaken by stories she had heard about the procedure, nervous about whether it would hurt.

And she said yes right away.

"I just decided we would want someone to do that for us if it were our children, and it's just a temporary discomfort for someone who's been in such horrible pain."

Bob admired her but couldn't shrug off his concern as her husband. He didn't want her to feel any pain, and he prayed, "God, let it be me."

After Jeannine went in for more blood tests, she found out that the patient was too ill for a transplant. But as if in answer to his prayers, Bob got a call this winter. He, too, was a possible match for someone. Like his wife, he responded without hesitation.

"God has directed us here to help someone else. Love thy neighbor as thyself," he said. "So how could I not? How could I not?"

Bob went in for a surgical procedure at Strong Memorial Hospital earlier this year, and doctors successfully drew marrow from his pelvic bone through a syringe attached to a needle.

After her husband went in for the procedure and the week before she did, Jeannine daydreamed about possibilities.

There's an odd romance in letting the nurses poke a collection of tubes down your neck and send your deep-red blood streaming into a rumbling centrifuge. Or maybe the romance is in the various hanging bags, where the separated parts of your blood will eventually be harvested for bone marrow and drip into the veins of someone whose name you have never heard.

Though Jeannine turned her head during the procedure, in her kitchen she fantasized about the hope contained within her millions of platelets and white blood cells.

She knows the woman she helped is 36, but not much more.

All she really had to know was that the woman needed her.

"She could be like me. She could have kids that are needing their mom."

Already, someone else, a 19-year-old woman, has probably received the bone marrow taken recently from her husband, Bob. Jeannine wonders about the teen, too.

"Her whole life is ahead of her. If she gets this chance, who knows? She could go on to have a family. She could go on to college. Or who knows? She could be the one who cures cancer someday because she got that chance to live."

After his procedure, Bob was out of work for a couple days; the pain turned out to be surprisingly minimal.

The biggest surprise, though, came the day after his surgery. Piper Wood, a donor services specialist at the greater New York state chapter of the National Marrow Donor Program had just finished guiding Bob through his procedure when she started searching for a new match. Jeannine's name popped up on her computer screen.

"The hair on the back of my neck stood up," Wood said. The chance that anyone is a match for a stranger is slim enough; the odds that two people in a family would be called to donate are estimated at 1 in 40,000. The DeRoos are amused by the nurse's exclamation that this has never happened, but they make no big deal of the peculiarity.

"Opportunity arises," Bob said simply. "We're humbled by it."

Their older children, who've heard their parents talk about the decision, seem humbled too. Bob and Jeannine overheard the two teenagers talking about joining the registry when they're old enough, and when 15-year-old son Joe Maggard was assigned to give a persuasive speech for his public speaking class, the topic he chose was why people should become donors.

"I don't see why anyone wouldn't do this," Joe said after Jeannine and Bob announced their decisions. "It's helping people who are sick and needing your help. Who wouldn't do that?"

At Jeannine's procedure, she sat patiently in the Strong Memorial Hospital bed, gripping the hand of her husband. Her marrow was drawn through her blood by a catheter, in a

process that takes up to four hours. On the little table beside her were a cup of coffee, a capful of calcium tablets and a yellow notepad on which she planned to write an anonymous letter to her recipient.

The DeRoos are nothing if not grateful, gushing over how nice the nurses were and how flattered they were that the hospital offered to bring them coffee and take care of gas and parking costs. Jeannine, with tubes running out the side of her neck, worried aloud about all the chemotherapy her recipient had to go through just to prepare her to receive bone marrow.

Then the DeRoos were daydreaming again.

Maybe someone else could use their bone marrow. Maybe their recipients will need more.

After a year, recipients are allowed to meet their donors if both choose to do so, and the DeRoos are excited about the prospect.

"But if we never do," Bob said, looking at his wife, "we wouldn't have done anything different."