

# Local woman donates her bone marrow to Polish man

By ROBERT PLAIN, Reformer Staff

Saturday, March 15

BRATTLEBORO -- Ginny Irish never gave much thought to Poland.

Then she donated some of her bone marrow to Edward Szczepaniak of Chwiran, a Polish city about 80 miles from the Baltic Sea.



Ginny and Jerry Irish hold a picture of Edward Szczepaniak and his family.

Now she has an international pen pal that she hopes to visit some day. "He doesn't understand English and I don't understand Polish," she said. "But he has a program that translates our e-mails. He went out and bought it so we could stay in touch. We've been e-mailing for a couple months now."

Irish, who works at Landmark College and lives in Brattleboro, donated her marrow a year ago. At the time, she had no idea who the recipient would be, except that he was a 43-year-old man.

But just prior to Christmas she got an e-mail from the National Marrow Donor Program asking her if she wanted to meet the man whose life she helped to save.

She did, and shortly thereafter she got an e-mail from the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

"He said thanks to me he can spend another Christmas with his family," Irish said. "I had tears in my eyes sitting at my desk at work."

Szczepaniak had leukemia for 11 years before getting Irish's marrow. He didn't think he would live another year. Since receiving Irish's donation, he has been cancer-free.

At the end of each e-mail, he thanks Irish for her generosity.

"Once again, my family thanks you from the bottom of our hearts," she said each of Szczepaniak's e-mail's conclude with. And Irish seems equally happy to have been in a position to help.

"Giving someone the gift of life, you certainly feel a connection to them," Irish said.

Her husband, Jerry, said her donation was par for the way she has tried to live her entire life.

"She really cares about people," he said. "I wasn't surprised at all when she wanted to become a donor."

Irish and Szczepaniak communicate on an almost weekly basis now.

Despite the gravitas of their introduction to one another, their conversations now tend to veer towards small talk.

"We talk about the weather, our kids, our animals," Irish said. "There is no snow in Poland, so we sent him pictures of the snow."

The next step in their relationship, Irish hopes, is an introduction.

"I'd really love to go to Poland some day and meet him face to face, give him a big hug," she said.