

## London man to meet his savior, a patient Gardens part-timer

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PALM BEACH GARDENS — At age 60, Lea Rosenberg gave birth to a 47-year-old man.

It's her funny way of summing up what she did more than three years ago.

George Kannides was dying at 47, and the chances were 1 in 60 million he would find someone able to donate the precious stem cells he needed to beat his leukemia.



Lea Rosenberg

Rosenberg, who lives in West Caldwell, N.J., an ocean away from Kannides' home in London, was his match.

Next month, Lea and her husband, Jerry, will leave for London, where they will meet Kannides for the first time.

The part-time Palm Beach Gardens residents have talked to him and his children by phone. They have exchanged happy e-mails and extended open-ended invitations to visit each other.

Now, Rosenberg is preparing for *besheret*, the Yiddish word for destiny.

"This was meant to be," she says. "God has a plan for all of us; this was God's plan for me."

That plan was set in motion more than 20 years ago when Rosenberg read about a young man in a nearby town in New Jersey who needed a bone-marrow transplant. Rosenberg was moved by his story.

The man was in his 20s, just starting in life, and she thought about her three daughters. She decided to be tested to be a donor. She wasn't a match for the man, but she thought she could help someone else someday, so she left her name in a registry of donors.

Rosenberg didn't hear back for years. Then, around 2004, she got a call from the HLA Registry Foundation, now part of New Jersey-based Community Blood Services. Was she still interested?

Of course she was.

It was a long journey, but it also served as a welcome distraction. "It gave me something else to focus on," she said.

Her husband had colon cancer that had metastasized to his liver. Rosenberg was too familiar with the disease. Her first husband, Jesse, had died of pancreatic cancer.

As she tended to Jerry, going to chemotherapy and nursing him after surgery, Lea was determined to find out whether she was a match for the unknown stem-cell recipient. Over a four-month period, she went through blood tests, a physical and a psychiatric evaluation.

Then came good news: She was a match. In October 2004, Rosenberg donated stem cells at St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center in Paterson, N.J.

Her thoughts wandered to her "stem-cell buddy." She prayed that her cells would help save a life.

"We prayed a lot," Lea said.

"For me and him," Jerry, 74, added.

Meanwhile, Kannides was at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in Manhattan for leukemia treatment.

Doctors in London had given up on his chances of surviving, he recalls. He was advised he had months left. Kannides, a professional chauffeur, told his boss, a wealthy Cypriot businessman who quickly resolved that his driver would go to New York for a second opinion.

"I managed to build a nice friendship between me and my boss," Kannides, now 50, said from his London home.

The trip saved his life. Doctors found Rosenberg, and by Christmas, Kannides was out of the hospital.

But he didn't know whom to thank. He exchanged a few anonymous letters with his donor through the registry program, but according to the rules, neither could reveal their identity until more time had passed.

When that time finally came in 2006, Kannides called Rosenberg, but the man with a second shot at life got so emotional he had to hand the phone to his wife.

The experience has been hard to describe, he said.

"I went to hell and back - several times," he said.

Then a stranger gave him the hope his doctors back home could not.

"Life," he said with a heavy sigh, "it's not the same anymore."

He used to be short-tempered. Took things too seriously. Now he takes life as it comes, he says.

What's coming next is planned as quite a celebration. Lea and Jerry will arrive in London on April 16. Kannides will greet them at the airport, and he and his wife, Koula, have invited the Rosenbergs to stay at their home.



George Kannides (second from left) plans a celebration when Lea Rosenberg, his bone-marrow donor, and her husband Jerry visit in April. Kannides – in London with son Savvas (left), daughter Des, wife Koula, son Mems and daughter-in-law Yiota – had been given months to live. Rosenberg signed up as a donor more than 20 years ago in New Jersey, but it wasn't until about 2004 that she was matched.

Kannides, who is Greek, wants to have a party to introduce the Rosenbergs to his friends and family. He'll probably cook some barbecue, Greek style, in their honor.

But he mostly wants to thank Lea, the person he hasn't stopped thinking about since his transplant.

"It's something you can't forget," he said.

How the donor program works

About 6,000 people a day search the registry at the National Marrow Donor Program for a stem-cell donor. They are children and adults suffering from leukemia, lymphoma or immunodeficiency disorders.

Many times, their only hope is a stem-cell donation obtained directly from a donor's bone marrow, collected through a process called apheresis or extracted from a newborn's umbilical cord after delivery.

A donor must be a good match for the transplant to be successful. Doctors check for this through a series of blood tests that compare the proteins in the donor's cells to those of the recipient.

Typically, the matching process takes four to six weeks, said Dr. Dennis Todd, president and CEO of New Jersey-based Community Blood Services.

To sign up as a potential donor, contact the National Marrow Donor Program at (800) MARROW2 (627-7692), or go to [www.marrow.org](http://www.marrow.org).