

Waiting to Meet His Match

Marrow donor is in a very rare category

By SHIRA SCHOENBERG Monitor staff

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Maybe it's the 20 years as a mechanic, which seem to have made Bob Morrill immune to pain. Maybe it's his good health and his muscular build. But to hear Morrill tell it, donating his blood cells to a cancer patient was no big deal.

"No part of the process hurts," he said. "If you're willing to give blood, it's no worse than that."

Morrill, of Concord, is one of more than 12,500 people across New England to register as a potential bone marrow donor through drives organized by Belmont resident Michael Guglielmo. Morrill is one of only nine who have actually donated. Guglielmo said 278 more people have been labeled potential matches, which means it will take further testing to determine whether their bone marrow is a match for a needy patient.

Morrill had hoped to remain anonymous, but Guglielmo found him through one of the drive's organizers. Morrill agreed to tell his story, if only to persuade others to register.

"A lot of people are in need, and you never know if you can help," he said. "I'll never be sorry I did it."

Morrill, 41, was born and raised in Concord. After graduating from Concord High School, he joined the U.S. Army, where he was stationed in Germany, as a mechanic, from 1985 to 1987. He now lives in Concord with his wife, Marat, and their two youngest children, ages 10 and 11. He works for Peterbilt Truck Co. in Bow.

The Morrills got on the national bone marrow registry about a year ago, through a drive at Friends of Forgotten Children in Concord run by the bone marrow donor foundation DKMS Americas. The Morrills heard about it through their membership in the local Moose Club. Holly Foote, who organized the drive, said Marat Morrill helped her post notices around town and asked her friends at Constantly Pizza to advertise on pizza boxes.

The drive was organized by Guglielmo, who became an advocate for bone marrow donation when his son Giovanni, now 20 months old, was suffering from a rare immune deficiency disorder. Giovanni received a cord blood donation a year ago. Guglielmo is now a New England consultant for DKMS Americas and works with the Red Cross in five New England states, organizing between 15 and 20 bone marrow drives a month, he said.

Bob Morrill knew what donating entailed because one of his family members had cancer and received a cell donation from her sister. Although most drives require only a cheek swab, at last year's drive, the couple had blood drawn.

Morrill knew that if his name came up, he would not hesitate.

"What's the sense of starting the process if you're not going to go through with it?" he said. "By then, the person knows they've found a match."

But neither he nor his wife expected to be called. Kim Ikenberry, manager of donor testing services for the Caitlin Raymond International Registry, another bone marrow donor foundation, said there are no accurate statistics on how common a match is, because it depends on an individual patient's needs. But it is relatively rare - generally, about 2,000 to 3,000 patients on the international registry cannot find a match, Ikenberry said.

After he got the call, Bob Morrill went to Concord Hospital for another blood test, which determined that he was a match.

"It felt good, but I wasn't as excited as she was," Morrill said, pointing to his wife.

"I was excited he had the possibility of saving someone's life," Marat Morrill said.

DKMS Americas walked them through the process, explained the procedures and possible side effects, and helped them wade through mounds of paperwork. Morrill went to Dana Farber Cancer Institute in Boston for a thorough physical. The doctors took vials of blood, did an EKG and an X-ray, Morrill said. Ikenberry said the physical ensures that the donor is in good health and will not face any undue risk from the donation.

In late February, Morrill started the donation process. Today, there are two types of bone marrow donation. In one, the donor undergoes a surgical procedure where a needle is inserted into the back of the pelvic bone to extract the bone marrow. Ikenberry said the donor is anesthetized during the procedure and is given medication to alleviate the pain afterward. Donors can generally return to work within a week.

The process Morrill went through is called peripheral blood stem cell collection. Ikenberry explained that the stem cells a patient needs occur naturally in the blood, but there are not enough for a transplant. So the donor is given shots of a medication that increases the number of stem cells in his bone marrow, and the cells then migrate into his blood. After a few days, the donor is connected to a machine with needles, which pulls the blood out, spins out the cells that the recipient needs, then puts the blood back in. The process generally takes four to five hours over one to two days, and the donor can return to work within a day or two, Ikenberry said.

Morrill said he went to Dana Farber for the first shot, then had a friend who was a nurse give him the next three shots at home. He had been warned about side effects, things like deep bone pain, but he said, "I had none of that."

One day, Morrill woke up feeling sore in his lower back. But, he said, "The day before, I took the clutch out of a truck, so I think it was self-induced."

On Feb. 25, Morrill and his wife returned to Dana Farber to have his blood cells harvested. His arms were hooked up to tubes and connected to a machine that took his blood out through one arm and put it back in the other. The process didn't hurt, he said, but it took seven hours.

"My arm was like this for a day," he said, extending his slightly bent arm in front of his body.

He watched a NASCAR race on TV. He watched drag racing. His wife stayed with him. A woman from Dana Farber, who had walked them through each visit, came in and out.

As he started heading home, Morrill said he suddenly felt exhausted. But he rested that evening and returned to work the next day. The whole process cost him three vacation days for the trips to Boston.

The Morrills have not met the recipient. DKMS representatives told the Morrills they can get more information within several months or a year, once the patient's outcome is clearer.

Morrill said if he is called back, he would be more than willing to donate again. "I'm healthy. I have the easy part," he said. "The person who's sick, they have to live with it a long time, they have it a lot harder."

Friends of Forgotten Children, at 224 Bog Road in Concord, will host another bone marrow drive from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Sunday.

For more information, visit <http://www.savegiovanni.org/> or call Friends of Forgotten Children at 753-4801.