

## Anonymous angel saves elderly leukemia patient

By Amanda Gordon

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Imagine lying in a starched white hospital bed, watching the drip of your IV and listening to the repetitive blip of your heart monitor, wondering where in the world you will find a donor to match your bone marrow.

Then the news comes. A match has been located.

On Tuesday, June 26, Kimberly Baxter, a mother of three and wife of a Navy officer, became someone's anonymous angel.

Four years ago, Whidbey Island Naval Air Station held a bone marrow drive, where a small amount of Baxter's blood was collected. Then, in January, she received a letter from the Bone Marrow Donor Program with news that she was a potential match for a patient.

Literally years after she was tested for the National Bone Marrow Donor Program, Baxter received a phone call that would launch her on a cross-country journey. On June 10, she boarded a plane to Washington, D.C. for a physical. On June 25, she returned to Washington, D.C. to donate the marrow the following day at the George Washington University Hospital.

Baxter's donation was coordinated by the Bill Young Department of Defense Marrow Donor Program. The program recruits donors from the active duty military, family members, civil service employees, Coast Guard, National Guard, and Reservists. The C.W. Bill Young Marrow Donor Center coordinates all the medical and logistic support for Department of Defense personnel who volunteer for the possibility of donating marrow. The recipient funded Baxter's flights and accommodations.

The only thing that Baxter knew about the recipient is that she is a 64-year-old woman with leukemia. Baxter and the recipient can both sign a waiver that exchanges contact information so they may meet one another, but not until one year has passed since the procedure. Baxter would like to meet her recipient, and she has also committed to donating again if more marrow is needed.

"It was a privilege," she said of her aid. "I couldn't even imagine having cancer."

She wasn't nervous, she said, even though she has never done anything like the bone marrow donation before.

"I know if somebody in my family needed bone marrow I would want someone else to do the same thing I did," she said.

Baxter's 8-month-old son Andrew is a constant reminder of cancer's unwelcome touch on a family. Andrew, blessed with good health, is named for his great-uncle, who passed away after being diagnosed with the same type of cancer that Kimberly's marrow match is battling: acute myelogenous leukemia.

"The timing was bad for us," confessed Baxter, whose husband, Brian, is a Lt. j.g. in the Navy.

Baxter is back living the life of a Navy wife, returning from Washington, D.C. on Thursday to her Oak Harbor home. The family moved to Illinois on Saturday, June 30.

"But I'm sure it was inconvenient for her to be ill," she said.

Numbers aside, the procedure for withdrawing the bone marrow is simple, but not painless. The bone marrow can be collected using a couple of different methods. In Baxter's case, marrow was taken from the pelvic bone with a large needle, and may cause some soreness.

"If you really want to donate and you really want to help someone, I don't think you will mind a little bit of pain," said Sharon Benabesa, laboratory technician at the Navy hospital.

The Baxters were surprised to learn Kimberly may be closer with her recipient than she thought. "There's a possibility that somewhere, their blood lines cross," said Brian, who accompanied Kimberly to Washington, D.C. last Tuesday. He explained that since relatives are most likely to be a match, it is feasible that the two women could be related somehow. Related or not, Kimberly Baxter feels the connection.

"I'm just crossing my fingers for her. I really hope it works," she said.