THE BEACON

Resident urges donating bone marrow

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When Laura Rakauskas' younger brother Bobby Dunn was 14, his doctors gave him less than two months to live. His only chance to beat a rare type of leukemia was a bone marrow transplant and he and Rakauskas were a near perfect match.

At 23, Rakauskas' marrow donation saved her brother's life. In the next 18 years, Dunn went on to become a biochemist for the Wyeth Pharmaceuticals, earn a black belt in karate, and get involved in various volunteer projects, like tutoring college students and building a Habitat for Humanity home in Mississippi.

Dunn died in April 2006 from complications resulting from the transplant.

Rakauskas, now 42 and a Boxborough resident for the last 10 years, wears a yellow Livestrong bracelet in memory of her brother's long fight with cancer. Even though her brother never fully recovered from cancer, she says that the extra time the transplant gave him was priceless.

She spoke with The Beacon on the 19th anniversary of her brother's bone marrow transplant about some of the myths of bone marrow donation and the importance of getting involved with organ and tissue donation.

Q: How did you get involved with bone marrow donation?

A: A lot like the people who are going through it today, by fire. There's an urgent need as a family member or a friend, as was the case with my brother. It was 1988, actually this is the 19th anniversary of his bone marrow transplant. I was extracted in Children's Hospital in Boston July 7th and he received it July 8th. I am one of five children and the four sisters, we're all a year apart, we were all tested and it was found that I was the closest match they'd ever seen with a brother and sister. Of the genetic markers, we matched so closely, that they called us genetically identical twins … born eight years apart. It was the perfect match.

Q: Wow, that can’t happen very often.

A: Unless it was an identical twin, they hadn’t seen that at that time, that close. He was in a very critical stage. He was approaching Stage 4, he was in Stage 3 of acute lymphocytic leukemia. His only chance, as in so many of the children and young adults that are faced with this dreadful disease, his only chance was a bone marrow transplant. And when they tested us they found that I was a match and immediately they started the process. I’ve had people say, “Had you thought about it? What about the complications?” When you’re faced with that one on one saving a life of a family member, you just don’t say no. You can’t say no. And it’s a gift of life that you bring to the person. And over the years I’ve seen many people react to the illnesses that their children have or that their spouse has and have bone marrow donor drives. I would like to see people take a proactive stance. … The experience that I got out of it is hard to put in words. If there was any way that any folks could have this deliberate act of kindness to register for the National Bone Marrow Registry, and they get chosen to help give a gift of life to someone who *will* die, it’s an experience that they will have forever. It’s not just that one person that they change the life of, they change the life of every single person that child or young adult passes through for the rest of their life.

Q: What’s it like to know that you helped someone live for 18 years longer than they would have otherwise?

A: It was as though he was my own child. When he went through the treatment, his body was completely depleted of an immune system. And it’s a very simple process. It looks like a bag of goo and they bring it in to him on an IV pole and they hook it up to his central line and it just drops in his body. As he started to accept the bone marrow he was getting better. I watched him come from having no immune system to getting better and growing his hair back. My brother used to be blonde and, this is probably coincidence, but he ended up having dark hair post-transplant. We used to joke around all the things he and I have gone through together, or the connection that we had. I think we have a connection or had a connection that we wouldn’t have had. I knew when he was sick, he knew when I was sick. It was something I just felt and I would call him and I would know that either I would have to call my mother or go see him myself. … For 18 years, he got up with the attitude of helping others. He helped build a Habitat for Humanity House in Mississippi, he was a college level tutor in math and science so he helped college level students achieve their goals. He was a drummer. He was the type of person that we would have been at a loss if he hadn’t been here. He made an impact in my children’s lives, in my sisters’ lives, in everyone that he touched. … It’s a whole new level of appreciation if you can help someone with the gift of life and then watch them appreciate the life that they’re given.

Q: Were you scared going into the transplant?

A: I wasn’t scared. I was more anxious to see him get better. The focus completely turns off of you, the donor, and turns into how is it going to help and I can’t wait. … I had minor soreness, as if you were sitting down for a long time. It’s a small price to pay for 18 years of his life.

Q: What’s the easiest way for people to get involved?

A: You can go onto the National Bone Marrow Registry Web site, fill out the very simple form and submit it and they will contact you. They swab your cheek and analyze it and put it into their database and match it up to a potential recipient. … If it’s a non-family member, the donor does not know who we're giving it to. That would be up to the family if they'd like to share that information. … Life is a privilege, not a right. And we are here, and if we can help someone else achieve that life, then I think we've done what we can do and that's why we're put here, whatever you believe in. The reason why I'm here is because I was one of those "someone in your family is sick, hurry up and get tested." But it would be nice if there were so many more donors that were just proactive saying "I'm going to go and give my DNA sample." I would like to see instead of the reactiveness that we have, that people be proactive and go out. It's as easy as filling out the form online. Submit it and they contact you and let you know where you can go to be tested. It's very easy, very painless.

Q: Do you think it's just that people aren't aware of the need or that they wait to be asked?

A: I think it's both. I think people don't think about what the need is for bone marrow until they see something on TV or they see a local drive for one of their own folks in the community that needs help and then people do come out and do support you in droves. I truly think number one that folks are misinformed, and number two they don't think about it, because everyone is busy. And until you're faced with that life changing statement I don't think people think about going to the Bone Marrow Registry to find out and get tested. The other thing about not being informed, it doesn't hurt. … There are people in the hospital right now waiting to hear whether or not they themselves or their child is going to make it to the next level to be able to be a recipient. If you are already there you've alleviated that waiting period. And during that waiting period, people do die. So they could eliminate that if they were a match.

To find out more about bone marrow donation, visit the National Marrow Donor Program at marrow.org.

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