



# Staten Island Advance

## 'Thank you for the gift of my life'

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- She knew, even before she learned his name, that he was her perfect match.

When cancer patient Lauren Peyton of Huguenot was 16 years old, she needed a bone marrow transplant in order to survive and a donor who shared as nearly as possible her unique genetic coding.

She found that donor in Frank Vooren, a house painter from the small German village of Werlte. He saved her life in 2003, but because of privacy regulations, she had to wait two years to learn his identity.

Beyond his being a 24-year-old male living somewhere in Europe, Ms. Peyton could only imagine who her rescuer might have been, and she did.... Maybe, she'd thought, he was a fireman.

Vooren, meanwhile, knew nothing about the girl who had needed his bone marrow cells. He'd joined a bone marrow pool years prior, in hopes he could help a sick resident of his village. He'd stayed registered in case he could help later on. When the opportunity arose, he didn't hesitate.

Late in the summer of 2003, on their respective sides of the Atlantic, Vooren and Ms. Peyton underwent rigorous preparations for the procedure. On Aug. 21, cells extracted by syringe at 9 a.m. in Germany were injected nine hours later into Ms. Peyton at Memorial Sloan-Kettering, Manhattan, who now carries Vooren's DNA in her own cells.

The two strangers -- an unlikely match, since they're not related-- became genetically bound.

Vooren is today nearing the end of a 10-day visit with Ms. Peyton and her adoring friends and family; his girl friend, Helene Hermann, is with him for this, his first visit to the United States.

"I would do it again a thousand times," said Vooren, who is not quite fluent in English. "We don't really know who is Lauren, but we prayed and hoped."

The union of the donor and recipient took place in Kennedy Airport, where Ms. Peyton and her mother held up a sign: ("Wilkommen Amerika -- Ich liebe dich"). Translation: Welcome to America. I love you.

But the pair had been chatting by e-mail since the day Ms. Peyton was allowed to make contact -- Aug. 21, 2005.

The two became regular pen pals over the Internet, swapping photographs and music.

Once, when two weeks lapsed without word from Ms. Peyton, Vooren worried over her and called her house for the first time.

Her mother, Lorene, said that when she answered the phone, her heart began to race when she realized who was calling. "She was hysterical crying," her daughter recalled.

Ms. Peyton, who is now a nursing student at Fairfield (Conn.) University, with plans to go into pediatric oncology, said she wasn't nervous to meet Vooren because she already felt they were close.

"We have the same personality," she said. "We both laugh a lot."

"Of course," said Vooren, referring to their biological likeness -- "We're twins."

Nevermind that they were born eight years apart.

After the transplant, Ms. Peyton started celebrating a new birthday -- on Aug. 21. The Peyton family gets an annual cake for the occasion -- in icing: "Thank you, Frank, for the gift of my life."

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