

## Bone marrow donation may be 'difference between life and death'

Residents search for matches amid donor shortage



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DELTA TWP - Delta Township resident Cheryl Ward, 46, never thought she'd be responsible for saving a stranger's life.

She was just hanging out with friends at a church festival 10 years ago when she spotted a bone marrow display booth.

"I'd never even given blood before," she says now.

But she and her friends spent a few minutes having a DNA cheek swab for a national registry.



She's a savior: Michele Guillory-Frank of Arlington, TX, (left) owes her life to Delta Township blood marrow donor Cheryl Ward (right). "I told her 'You're my blood sister,'" Guillory-Frank said.

It didn't hurt, so why not?

As an African American, Ward's decision was especially crucial.

Only about 8 percent of the more than six million people on the bone marrow registry are black, and successful transplants can occur only between people of the same race.

Local residents will have the chance to add their names to the registry at Lansing's Ferris Park Saturday, during the African American parade.

### **Finding a match**

Time passed, and Ward and her friends weren't called by the registry.

That was until the phone rang several years ago, and Ward learned that she was a match for a woman with severe aplastic anemia in Arlington, Texas.

Would she be willing to donate?

Ward, a state Department of Transportation office manager who had never been ill herself, didn't hesitate.

"I knew I would do it," she said. "It wasn't about me. I had the chance to do something for someone."

Right now, there are 3,000 people in the United States waiting for a match.

Only 30 percent of patients are able to find a family match, said Eric Trosko, of the Great Lakes Chapter of the National Marrow Donor Program (NMDP) in East Lansing. The rest have to wait for strangers like Cheryl Ward.

### **Registry representation**

"Caucasian patients have an 80 percent chance of finding a marrow donor," Trosko said. "Minority patients have only about a 60 percent chance."

It's not just African-Americans who are underrepresented on the registry, Trosko said. So are Asians, Native Americans, Hispanics and Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders. Those who are biracial also have trouble finding matches.

Ward believes many people are simply unaware of the need for marrow donors, which makes finding matches difficult. Those that are aware may not understand what's involved.

"There are two misconceptions about bone marrow donation," she said. "First, that you must have a blood test and then that the marrow has to be drawn from your hip."

Neither was true for Ward. The DNA cheek swab was painless and her donation was from her arm through a process called apheresis, which resembles blood donation.

Some donors worry about side effects. With their platelet count down, some might bruise or bleed more easily for awhile. The most common complaints during apheresis are headaches and bone aches, but these go away when the collection is over. Those who donate from their hips may have lower back pain, feel tired or have some trouble walking. Most bounce back in a few days. Others may take two or three weeks.

### **What is marrow?**

Marrow is the soft tissue inside your bones that makes blood-forming cells that can turn into platelets or red or white blood cells.

There are three ways to donate it. The first is through a surgical procedure in the hospital during which marrow is taken from your pelvic bone under anesthesia. The second is by banking a newborn's blood from the umbilical cord.

The third, called PBSC donation, collects marrow from your bloodstream through apheresis, the process used on Ward.

After taking a drug that increased her marrow cells for several days, she spent a day at the Karmanos Cancer Institute in Detroit. Her blood was removed from her arm, the blood-forming cells captured and her blood returned through her other arm. The process took several hours.

"I had a good night's sleep, took a day off work and slept in the next day," Ward said.

Lansing Community College trustee Robert Proctor also remembers the day he got a call about a possible match that didn't work out.

"I had a tingle of excitement at being able to help someone," he says. "I've come to recognize that it (bone marrow donation) is the difference between life and death." Proctor's wife Merritta is also on the registry.

Mary Jo White is a reporter with the Lansing Community Newspapers.

**StoryChat** 

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I had my transplant in January and had 4 possible perfect matches. I encourage everyone (especially minorities) to join the registry. It's painless to join and vitrually painless to donate.

My Doctor at Sparrow that first diagnosed me was Native American. He looked at me one day and said, "You should be glad you are white right now because if I ever had Leukemia I would never find a match."

My life was saved by a donor that I get to meet next year! Please donate if you can.