

# South Jersey Life

## From Strangers to Sisters

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Bone marrow donor Stacy Strout

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It was April, 2004 and Claire Joyce, her body ravaged by acute myeloid leukemia, had been given no more than a week to live.

More than 3,000 miles from Claire's home in Surrey, British Columbia, an hour's ride from Vancouver, West Deptford resident Stacy Strout was in Delaware having bone marrow drawn from the back of her pelvis.

The 45-minute procedure, causing Stacy only slight pain, saved Claire Joyce's life.

"That's not much time out of your life to save another," Stacy says matter-of-factly. And more than three years after the women were bonded eternally through Stacy's wondrous gift of life, they came face-to-face in Canada to share their stories, to hug, to cry.

"We're like sisters now," Stacy says. "We clicked."

Stacy Strout had donated bone marrow previously and was on the national registry. The registry called her from Philadelphia and informed her she was a match for a woman who had precious little time. On April 24, 2004, Stacy made her donation.

"If no one gives, she dies," says Stacy, who was told only that she was helping a 52-year-old woman who was dying of leukemia. "I give blood faithfully. And bone marrow comes back. You can help save someone else."

"It's not that painful. The line I had was very good. You fill up two shot glasses. It takes only 45 minutes. It's just one day out of your life."



Claire Joyce of Surrey, British Columbia

But did she know her donation saved the woman?

"I didn't know if she was alive or dead," Stacy says. "I didn't even know what country she was from. There can be contact, but not for a year because Canadian disclosure laws take longer."

One day a letter arrived in West Deptford from Claire Joyce.

"It was a lengthy letter. She said she had been told I wanted to talk to her, to meet her. She thanked me for saving her life.

"E-mails and phone calls followed. She kept me in the loop of her life. She said they were building a house. Their son (Cameron) was getting married in July 2006. She said if it hadn't been for me, she wouldn't have been there for any of it."

They continued to communicate. Letters. E-mails. Calls. "I knew everything about her family," Stacy says. "I felt I had gotten close to her. We talked about me going to Canada to visit her. But I'd never been away from my family, never traveled alone before."

Stacy's husband, David, made up her mind for her. He thoughtfully gave her plane fare to Vancouver as a Christmas gift last year.

"I know you want to meet her," David said. "You pick the time, I'll watch the kids (David Jr., 10, Max, who turns 5 on July 3)."

"I called to tell her," Stacy says. "She was excited and very emotional. She said her family and friends wanted to meet me."

Stacy flew to Vancouver first week in May. There was no media coverage. That would come later. Claire "didn't want a circus" at the airport. It was just she and her husband Doug as the welcoming party.

"It was different than I expected," Stacy says. "I wasn't as emotional as I thought I'd be. But I was so happy to see her. It was a surreal situation. You're happy to see her but can't believe you're there."

The Joyces took their New Jersey guest to see the local sights: Vancouver Island, Victoria, the breathtaking mountains, the lakes. Several nights, Doug Joyce cooked them dinner while they talked.

"We were buddies for a week," Stacy says. "She wanted to keep it private."

The pace changed that Saturday when Stacy was guest of honor at a party at the Joyces' home attended by close friends and family including her mother and son. TV and newspaper reporters were also there. She saw herself interviewed on a Vancouver TV station.

"She asked if me it was OK," Stacy says. "I told her it was. I knew it meant a lot to her."

A retired elementary school principal, Claire didn't hold back that week as she repeatedly related how Stacy's gift had made so many things possible. She was able to be there when her dad passed away. She danced with her son at his wedding.

"I'm glad I went and when I left I was comfortable enough to have stayed another week," Stacy says. "She's such a wonderful person, so full of life, so appreciative. She told me, 'We're family now.'"

"I told her when she's ready to come here for a visit we're ready for her. We'd make her as much at home as she made me."

"I'm so happy I was able to give my bone marrow. And I'd do it again. I'm not coming off the list."