

I Can Never Repay Him For What's He's Given Me But Shaw Knows I'll Always Love Him

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American Girl Travelled 5000 Miles To Thank Bone Marrow Donor Who Gave Her The Gift Of Life

AN American teenager with an extraordinary story has travelled half way around the world to thank the Scot who saved her life.

Rachel Rack, from Virginia, in the US, was just two when she was diagnosed with leukaemia and a search was launched to find suitable bone marrow donors.

Incredibly dad-of-three Shaw McIntyre, from Whitburn, West Lothian, was the only perfect match.

That gift from a stranger living 5000 miles away meant Rachel made a full recovery. It was also the start of a remarkable friendship.

Now 13, Rachel has come to Scotland for the first time to inspire more people to sign up for the life-saving register.

Rachel says: "Shaw is truly a gift sent from heaven. I can probably never repay him for what he gave to me, but he knows I will always love him.

"He will always have a special place in my heart. What do you say to someone who has given you back your life?"

And self-employed roofer Shaw, 45, whose own daughter Amanda is also 13, visits Rachel's family in the US every year.

Raising more than £10,000 for the Anthony Nolan Trust, Shaw knows exactly how vital their work is.

He says: "There was someone out there waiting for someone like me to come along with the chance, the slightest chance, of a new life.

"Each visit is magical, but the first one really stands out in my memory. To meet this fantastic family and be treated the way I have been is beyond words."

Rachel had only a 50 per cent chance of survival when she received the bone marrow transplant on October 31, 1996. For her parents Mary, 53, and Ed, 48, it was their last hope after a fierce battle which had started when Rachel was just 10 months old with a marble-sized bruise that refused to go away.

Tests revealed Rachel had b cell lymphoma, a cancer of the lymph system.

After six months of chemotherapy the cancer went in to remission, but a routine check revealed the cancer had come back as acute lymphocytic leukemia, the most common form of childhood leukaemia.

The odds were against Rachel as a staggering 75 per cent of her bone marrow was cancer cells.

Too ill even to play, Rachel's favourite movie became The Wizard of Oz. And she was thrilled when a family friend gave her a pair of red slippers just like the ones Dorothy wore on the journey to the Emerald City.

Her mum Mary says: "Rachel wore them all through her treatment.

"Like Dorothy, all Rachel wanted was to go home. There's no place like home, but instead her home became a hospital ward."

Rachel lost her hair, was too weak to walk or even play with her big brother Adam, now 15, or baby sister Rebecca, now 11, who was born in January 1996, just months before Rachel's leukaemia was discovered.

Rachel says: "The doctor told my mum and dad that my 92 per cent chance for survival had dropped to 50 per cent. They had to get my cancer back into remission and then I would need a bone marrow transplant."

Meanwhile in Scotland, Shaw who was on the bone marrow register, volunteered immediately when told he was a match to someone in the world.

Doctors explained strict rules meant if he did donate his bone marrow, he'd have to wait at least two years before he and the recipient's family were able to contact each other.

Shaw was taken to London's Harley Street Hospital where a surgeon took a sample of his bone marrow then flew it across the Atlantic.

At the Medical College of Virginia when the bone marrow arrived at 9.30pm doctors told Rachel's parents that timing meant it was almost certainly from Europe.

Shaw also sent a badge with an angel on it as a good luck gesture.

Rachel's mum Mary says: "That's the only clue we had about the donor.

"They don't tell you anything. Of course we wanted to find out who this stranger was. It was so important to be able to say thank you."

SIX days later as Rachel steadily recovered, Mary sat down by her bed side and wrote the most important letter of her life. She had no names so could only start it with 'Dear Mr Donor'.

When that letter was finally forwarded to Shaw, he treasured it and vowed to contact the family as soon as the rules allowed it.

Shaw says: "As soon as I got that number I called and asked, 'how is your little girl?'"

When Rachel's mum Mary heard the strange accent on the other end of the phone, she knew it was her daughter's life saver. From that moment they had a special bond and Shaw was invited to go out and visit.

Rachel's dad Ed says: "Shaw drove up, got out of the car, walked up and gave me a big bear hug. It was like meeting a new brother."

And Shaw struggled to hold back tears when he met for the first time the vivacious little girl whose life he'd saved.

Shaw says: "I kept wondering how both Rachel and I would react when we met.

"That afternoon Rachel was shy but I gave her a hug and introduced myself.

"That night the most magical thing happened. I was in a room next to where Rachel was saying good night to her mum and dad when she said: 'Mum, dad, I love Shaw'. I turned the corner, leaned over and picked her up and we gave each other a big hug. I was wiping tears from my eyes after that."

The next year Shaw went back out to visit Rachel's family, this time bringing his wife Liz, 43, and kids Phillip, 18, Stewart, 16, and Amanda, 13.

Both families were guests of honour at the Anthony Nolan fundraising ball in Glasgow on Saturday and today, at the start of the Anthony Nolan Awareness Week, they hope their story will inspire others.

'He is a gift sent from heaven. What do you say to someone who has given you back you life?'