

# PALO ALTO DAILY NEWS

## Medical student meets her saviour

### Sunnyvale bone marrow donor would do it again in an instant

By Melanie Carroll / Daily News Staff Writer

They had a lot of catching up to do after 16 years.

When Melissa Juliano was 11 years old, she received a life-saving bone marrow transplant from a woman in California. On Saturday night Juliano met her "angel," Sunnyvale's Jeanne DiLeo, for the first time.

"I was a miracle," said 27-year-old Juliano, during a dinner celebrating the Asian American Donor Program on Saturday. "I wouldn't be here without her."

The AADP is a nonprofit aimed at increasing the availability of potential stem cell donors for patients with life-threatening diseases such as leukemia, lymphoma and aplastic anemia.



Melissa Juliano, right, of Canton, Ohio, is speechless as she meets her bone marrow donor, Jeanne DiLeo, of Sunnyvale, for the first time during the 18th annual Asian American Donor Program gala held at the Pacific Athletic Club in Redwood City. DiLeo donated bone marrow to Juliano 16 years ago and met her for the first time at the event.

Juliano was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia when she was 9. DiLeo, who was in the National Marrow Donor Program registry, provided the stem cells/bone marrow needed to save the girl's life in 1991.

The two embraced for the first time, dabbing tears from their eyes, in front of a crowd of diners gathered at the Pacific Athletic Club in Redwood Shores.

Juliano and DiLeo moved from the front of the room to a table off to the side to talk about their lives over the last 16 years

since the successful transplant. They had communicated by e-mail, letters and talked on the phone previously, but never met in the flesh.

"I just want to spend a week with her and catch up" with Jeanne, Juliano said.

Juliano, a third-year medical student at Ohio University, was scheduled to return to the Midwestern state Sunday, less than 24 hours after meeting DiLeo. They decided late Saturday that they would hunker down at DiLeo's Sunnyvale home for a night of girl talk.

"This is so weird. It's like seeing your favorite rock star," Juliano said as she sat next to her

donor.

Fifty-three-year-old DiLeo, who works for the U.S. Geological Survey, likened the experience to meeting a daughter.

Sixteen years ago, DiLeo had the bone marrow -- which replenishes itself naturally in a matter of weeks -- taken from her hip bones at Stanford Hospital. The material was flown to Children's Hospital in Milwaukee for the successful transplant, and the rest, well, is history.

Dileo said she would happily serve again as a donor.

"I never expected this because it's been 16 years," Juliano said. "This is very emotional."

Juliano, who is of European descent, had nearly all the same human leukocyte antigen, or HLA, markers as DiLeo, thereby making the match possible. DiLeo is half Japanese and half Italian.

There is a severe shortage of ethnic minorities registered in the National Marrow Donors Program, according to the AADP. In marrow-blood stem cell matches, there are 10 HLA markers. Generally, a minimum of eight HLA markers are needed to ensure a successful match and transplant. The nonprofit's goal is to recruit quality, committed donors for patients.

"Finding a match, is like trying to find your unrelated identical twin in a pool of just seven million registered donors," said Carol Gillespie, AADP's executive director. "I can't stress enough how important it is for people of any ethnicity, but particularly ethnic minorities, to join the registry with the hope of saving someone's life."