

Small sacrifice, big return

Donor meets girl who received his bone marrow

By Elena Ferrarin | Reflejos Staff Writer

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How difficult is it to help save someone's life?

Not very, according to Gus Reyes of Pingree Grove.

Thanks to Reyes' bone marrow donation, a little girl is healthy and looking forward to going back to school in her hometown of McAllen, Texas.

Reyes, 34, and Selena Garza, 10, met for the first time Monday at Abbott Molecular in Des Plaines, where Reyes works as a quality control supervisor.

Their meeting was witnessed by about 200 people, mostly Abbott staff, who broke into a long applause as the two hugged.

Her little body shaking with sobs, Selena clutched onto Reyes's waist.

"Thank you," she said.

He, too, was crying, as were his wife and son and Selena's mother, sister, brother and brother-in-law.

"This is a miracle, and I am just glad to have been a part of it," Reyes said.

Doctors had given Selena a 10 percent chance of survival after she was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia in March 2006. Her only chance was a bone marrow donation, but no family member was a match.

"I prayed every single night and day asking God, 'Please, don't take her away -- she's too little,'" said Selena's mother, Elena Garza.

Around the same time, Reyes, a regular blood donor, had his cheek swabbed for a DNA sample for the National Marrow Donor Program during a LifeSource blood drive held at his workplace.



Bone marrow donor Gus Reyes of Pingree Grove is overcome with emotion as he meets 10-year-old Selena Garza from McAllen, Texas, at Abbott Molecular in Des Plaines. His bone marrow saved Selena's life.

When he found out about six weeks later that he was a match for a little girl, he thought of his son, Gabriel, who was the same age.

"I started thinking, 'What if he was sick, what would I want somebody to do? I would want somebody to step forward for him,'" Reyes said.

Only one in four people who need a bone marrow donation finds a match among family members. Every year, about 4,000 people in the United States get bone marrow transplants from strangers to help cure leukemia, lymphoma and other potentially deadly illnesses.

Another 6,000 people are waiting for a match, said Jeffrey Chell, chief executive of the National Marrow Donor Program.

The odds are worse for minorities -- Hispanics have a 75 percent chance and blacks only a 60 percent chance of finding a match, Chell said.

Donating bone marrow entails going under general anesthesia to have the marrow drawn from the back of the pelvic bones. "It's really not that big of a deal. You're sore but three days later you feel fine," Reyes said.

After receiving the bone marrow transplant on Aug. 18, 2006, Selena spent a few months at Texas Children's Hospital in Houston, fighting side effects such as vomiting and mouth sores, and heart and kidney complications.

She also needed two "booster" marrow transplants but was finally declared disease-free a couple of weeks ago, said Pat Alcoser, a nurse practitioner in the bone marrow program of Texas Children's Hospital.

"She's a quiet, stoic little girl. She's just a pillar of strength," Alcoser said.

Selena wrote to Reyes in August, after the one-year no-contact donation policy had expired. The two exchanged letters and talked on the phone before Abbott Molecular sponsored this week's trip to Chicago for Selena and her family.

"I feel good," Selena said. "Now I can play, and I like to dance to Michael Jackson."

Reyes said he hopes more people will step up to help those in need by donating bone marrow.

"From a donor's perspective, it's not that big of a sacrifice at all," Reyes said.