

Marrow transplant has toddler going full steam

'ANGEL' APPEARED: The match was on a European donor registry.

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WASILLA -- By early July 2006, Alicia and Steve Dunham learned that their son Connor was losing his battle with cancer. The 2-year-old had been diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia, or ALL, that May.

ALL is the most common type of leukemia among children under age 19, according to the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. The survival rate for children under 5 with ALL is about 90 percent, according to the society.

But an abnormality in Connor's chromosomes, the Dunhams learned, rendered nearly useless the twice- or thrice-weekly chemotherapy treatments he'd received since his diagnosis. Though he seemed healthy and energetic, his cancer had not reached remission, said Alicia Dunham, who is on leave from her job with a local pharmacy.

A bone-marrow transplant, she said, was his best chance for survival. Since his tissue type matched neither of his parents' nor any of his extended family members', Connor's name was placed on a bone-marrow transplant waiting list.

Though more than 6 million people are on the National Marrow Donor Program Registry, Connor's wait for a suitable donor lasted nearly two months.



Alicia Dunham's 3-year-old son, Connor, had a bone-marrow transplant a year ago, and Dunham says today he's as healthy and energetic as any toddler.

"In the beginning it seemed like nothing was going our way," Dunham said. "Each time, the news came back bad and it was like, we can't win here. ... Then a miracle bag showed up, and then they hooked it up to his transfusion and 45 minutes later he had his transplant."

That miracle bag, she said, came from a 34-year-old woman on a European donor registry whose tissue was a near-perfect match for Connor's.



Post-transplant Connor, 3, is now as healthy and energetic as any toddler, says his mother.

"It was an angel that signed up to be on the registry over there and without her he wouldn't be here today," she said.

Dunham is in search of other angels.

She's encouraging friends, family members and anyone else to register with the National Marrow Donor Program at the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society's Light the Night Walk on Friday.

Light the Night is an annual event aimed at raising funds for improved treatments and cures for leukemia and other blood cancers. This year's walk will feature a blood drive and bone marrow donor registration sponsored by the Blood Bank of Alaska.

"It's so simple. It only takes a cheek swab to go on the registry," Dunham said.

If laboratory testing of those swabs shows your tissue type matches that of a patient seeking a donor, additional tests will be conducted to confirm that match, according to the Blood Bank of Alaska's Web site.

The bone-marrow collection process is performed in Seattle and may require an overnight stay in the hospital, according to the Web site.

Despite the inconvenience and some soreness in the hips that might linger temporarily, the effort is vital, according to the blood bank. While some patients have a genetically matched family member who can donate, about 70 percent do not, it reports.

What's more on any given day, more than 6,000 men, women and children are in need of a bone-marrow transplant, according to the National Marrow Donor Program's Web site.

Thanks to his transplant, Connor is now "doing great," Dunham says. "He's an ornery 3-year-old who keeps me on my toes at all times."

He's coming up on his one-year transplant anniversary, she said: "To make it to a year is a big deal."

But many of the families the Dunhams met at the Ronald McDonald House in Seattle, where they stayed for a year while Connor was being treated, have not been so lucky, she said. And many, she said, did not have the ongoing support of family and friends that the Dunhams enjoyed throughout their yearlong battle.

Participating in the Light the Night Walk and recruiting bone-marrow donors for other children in need of transplants is her way of giving back, she said.

"Last year for the walk Steve had friends that got a team together that walked in Connor's honor," she said. "This year it's a privilege to be able to walk together as a family."

They'll make that walk with Connor's Crew, she said, a group that so far numbers about 15 friends and family members. Anyone wishing to join that crew is welcome, she said.