

Sikeston teenager is fighting Hodgkin's

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SIKESTON — All 18-year-old Ashley Davis and her family are asking Southeast Missouri residents for is a swab of the inside of their cheeks.

The 2007 Sikeston High School graduate spent the past year undergoing radiation treatments at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tenn., in an effort to rid her body of Hodgkin's disease — a cancer that starts in lymphatic tissue.

While Davis' blood counts are currently up, and she's getting stronger, a bone marrow transplant is what she really needs.

That's why a bone marrow donor drive designed to assist Davis will be from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday in multipurpose building at the Cornerstone Baptist Church, 127 W. Trotter St., in Sikeston. Participants will have the inside of their cheeks swabbed with the results placed on the National Marrow Donor Program Registry.

"We all are prayerful and positive that this is going to work," said Ashley's aunt, Angela Longstreet.

Prior to her illness, Davis' dream was to go into the service. Now the outgoing teen wants to be a nurse, her aunt said.

Davis, who was unavailable for an interview, is the daughter of Carla Davis and Vince and Lisa Longstreet of Sikeston.

"We're just reaching out to all the Bootheel community for any match. ... (Through this drive) We're hoping to bring the Sikeston community closer than what it used to be," Vince Longstreet said.

The idea for the marrow donor drive originated from Anita Moore, who works with Davis' father. Moore's interest stems from her own experience six years ago when her then 12-year-old daughter, Holly, had leukemia.

"My daughter was able to donate to herself, and they harvested her own stem cells although they had (umbilical) cord blood marked if she needed it," Moore said.



Ashley Davis

Moore said she understood what Davis and her family were going through, and with their permission, she organized the marrow donor drive through the National Marrow Donor Program.

The goal of the drive is to find one person in the area whose bone marrow will match Davis' so she can receive a bone marrow transplant.

"Ashley is going to likely find her own match in her own ethnic group, but we encourage everyone to come out and donate," said LaGail Chism of Leadwood, Kan., recruiters' specialist for the Bria Chism Foundation and National Marrow Donor Program/Heart of America.

In addition to finding a match for Davis and others in need, Chism is hoping to raise awareness for the need of minority donors in general.

"The Registry is comprised of over almost 7 million. Of that 4.7 or 4.8 million are Caucasian, and the rest are minorities," Chism said.

Chism, whose granddaughter died from leukemia, even started a minority recruitment group foundation in her granddaughter's name, the Bria T. Chism Foundation.

Because minorities are dying at a large rate due to the low availability of donors, a grant allows minorities to test their marrow for tissue typing at no cost. Non-minorities will pay \$25, which is tax-deductible, for tissue typing, Chism said.

"It only takes anywhere from about 15-18 minutes of your time," Chism said. Eligible donors must be between ages 18 and 60, Chism said. They must be in good, general health and meet health guidelines.

"For example, you can't have had a heart attack, chronic asthma or be diabetic — and this is more so to protect them than the recipient," Chism said.

Once they qualify, donors must watch a nine-minute video, fill out a consent form, provide their medical history and swab the inside of their cheeks.

"If you are a match, the Registry will give you a call or write you a letter saying, 'You are a match. Do you still want to help?' If you say yes, you're scheduled for more testing, which would include blood tests and a work-up, and then you'll donate," Chism said.

For marrow donations, a long syringe will be used to pull marrow through the pelvic area, and they will be put under anesthesia. If a person needs stem cells, they will pull blood from the arm and take stem cells out and then restore the blood, Chism explained.

But the process to be placed in the Registry is a simple one, assured Moore, who has been in the Registry for several years.

"You don't feel it. It's just something that's easy, and it's not scary. ...The donor will do it themselves with assistance available if they need it," Moore said.

Today Moore said her daughter, now 19, is cancer-free and living a normal life.

"I want the same for Ashley," Moore said.

So does Vince Longstreet. He said his daughter will turn 19 on Nov. 21. "I want my daughter to be healthy again so she can have the chance to fulfill her dreams in life," he said.

For those who are unable to make the donor drive on Saturday, Chism suggested visiting the Registry's official site: nmdp.org.