

Hannah, 4, saved big brother's life

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By Mark Hughes

CARLISLE schoolboy Niall Ritchie hugs his four-year-old sister Hannah – just months after she gave him the bone marrow that saved his life.

Football-mad Niall, 13, was diagnosed with life-threatening acute lymphoblastic leukaemia in May 2003.

The Manchester United fan, who lives just outside Carlisle, had chemotherapy and was in remission but relapsed in July last year.

After more chemotherapy it was decided that Niall, a pupil at Trinity School in the city, needed a bone marrow transplant.

Neither of his parents were suitable matches but Hannah was perfect and the task of saving Niall's life fell to her.

Mum Jane said: "She was so brave. We explained to her that Niall was very poorly and she had some good blood that would make him better.

"We told her that she was going to have an injection that would put her into a magic sleep. She was fine about the whole thing."

Hannah donated her bone marrow at Newcastle's Royal Victoria Infirmary before it was taken across to Niall in Newcastle General Hospital.

Jane added: "At first the doctors were worried that, because of Hannah's size and weight, she might not be able to give enough bone marrow.

"They had to do tests to make sure that she was fit enough. But because Niall is quite small they were confident they would be able to get enough out of her.

"Although it isn't unheard of for someone so young to give bone marrow, it is quite rare. We were just glad that one of us was a perfect match because



Pals: Niall Ritchie, 13, with four-year-old sister Hannah who donated her bone marrow to help him fight leukaemia

otherwise, we would have had to go to the national donors list to find a match.”

Hannah was in hospital for two days and just three days later she was back at nursery.

Niall spent seven weeks in isolation after his operation in March this year.

With only four adults allowed to see him, lifesaver Hannah could only watch her big brother’s recovery from behind a window.

However Niall’s recovery is now complete and last week he was rewarded for his bravery when he was invited to meet his Manchester United heroes in training.

Niall was chosen to take part in one of the Premiership club’s Dream Days, a chance for children with life-limiting diseases to meet their idols.

Niall, along with his dad, spent the day watching United’s first team train and then posed for pictures with stars such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Wayne Rooney and £12m new boy Nani.

He also had his shirt signed by the first team which will be framed and put on his wall alongside his other prized possession – a Barcelona shirt signed by Ronaldinho.

The Brazilian superstar sent Niall the gift when the teenager’s grandma sent Barca a letter telling them of his illness.

Of her son’s United trip, Jane said: “He hasn’t stopped talking about it. He feels so lucky that out of all the Man Utd fans in the country he was chosen to meet the players.”