

Mineral Daily News-Tribune

Woman gives sister gift of life

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Published: Monday, September 10, 2007 10:40 PM CDT

WILEY FORD - Acute Myelodyspalagia Leukemia survivor Barbara Clark says she is thankful to have a "third chance in life" after surviving Hodgkin's Disease 25 years ago and a bone marrow transplant in February - the Wiley Ford resident is literally a walking miracle.

"My last bone marrow aspiration revealed that Terri's bone marrow was working in me 100 percent," said Clark, referring to her sister, Terri Hamilton, who ended up being a 100 percent match for the transplant.

Hamilton, who suffers from chronic back pain and has undergone numerous surgeries, decided to get her bone marrow tested, along with their other sister, Kimberly Benson, of Englwood, Fla.

"The doctors were only giving us a 25 percent chance of being a match," said Hamilton. "We had to be 70 percent compatible or higher or they would have gone to the National Bone Marrow Registry. She could still be on the list."

With Hamilton a perfect match, Clark endured six days of chemotherapy to destroy the remaining bone marrow in her body, which left her with no immune system for three weeks.

Doctors said she would most likely suffer from liver, kidney, or heart failure, rejection of graft and/or bone marrow, or an infection could have killed her since she had no immune system. The time of year was also flu season.

"I had no fevers, no organ damage. Anything bad that could have happened didn't," said Clark. "Three weeks after the transplant my white blood cells were



Sisters Kimberly Benson (L) of Englewood, Fla., Barbara Clark (C) of Wiley Ford, and Terri Hamilton of Keyser pose for a family photo during a recent visit to Clark's residence.

coming up. Each month they come up a couple of points. Now I am at low normal.”

Hamilton said the doctors were amazed by Clark's strong recovery.

“Her progress through this astounded the doctors,” said Hamilton, referring to Clark's physicians at both John Hopkins and Western Maryland Health System's Braddock Campus.

Hamilton underwent a small surgery consisting of eight small puncture holes in her lower back.

The doctors then transferred the marrow into Clark's system by way of a six-hour transfusion.

“It was same-day surgery,” said Hamilton. “I had no complications. If I can go through it with a bad back and they went to where my pain is, anybody can do it. It was no big deal.”

The sisters would like to become advocates for anybody suffering from any form of Leukemia - Clark as a survivor, Hamilton as a donor.

“My sister gave me the gift of life and I would like to encourage everyone out there to get tested to be a donor,” said Clark. “It's as easy as having the inside of your cheek swabbed or getting your blood tested. It is faster than giving blood.”

Hamilton says she would go through the surgery again for a stranger.

“There is nothing more rewarding than saving a life,” said Hamilton.

Benson sent a letter describing how simple and important it is to become a bone marrow donor, saying, “You never know, you just might save a life or two, a family member, a child, a stranger. Kindness is like a boomerang, it always comes back.”

Clark, who was ordered to not work for a year, plans to return to her job of 18 years at Progressive Physical Therapy in February or March. She also plans to volunteer at the cancer center at the Braddock Campus.

Clark was thankful to her doctors - Dr. Smith and Sydney Kimmell at the Cancer Center at Johns Hopkins and Dr. Alida Podrumar at the regional cancer center at WMHS.

She is also thankful for her husband, Mike, and daughter, Brandi, for their continued support traveling with her to every doctor's appointment, as well as co-workers, friends, and prayer from several area churches.

She received immense support from a benefit hosted in her honor this past spring by her co-workers at Progressive. The money raised went to offset her outpatient expenses while she recovered for 60 days in Baltimore.

Her classmates - Ridgeley High School class of 1974 - hosted a fundraiser collecting donations and putting it in a savings account at Algar Credit Union in Cumberland.

Most importantly, she would like to thank her sister, Terri, who gave her the gift of life.

"My sister gave me life and I'd like to encourage everyone out there to get tested to be a donor," said Clark.