

# Local bone-marrow donor meets the girl who changed his life

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People who knew her marvelled at Cori-Ann Herrington's fighting spirit after years of battling leukemia.

She never let it get her down, even when it put her back at school, or when she had to go to the hospital for her umpteenth treatment. Her doctors at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto even came up with a nickname for her -- Superkid.

"They called me that because I was handling everything so well," said the 18-year-old.

"I decided to make everything a joke, and laughter became the medicine in my life."

But even super kids have their bad days, and the cancer raging in her blood was quickly exposing Herrington's frailties. Ultimately, she would need a bone-marrow donor to survive.

But no one in her immediate family was a match. And after two months of looking her last hope was finding a one-in-a-million match from the unrelated bone-marrow donor registry.

That's where Waterloo's Jeff Stacey came in. Stacey, a local PhD English candidate at the University of Waterloo, had registered in Grade 9 when a schoolmate of his was going through a similar battle with cancer.

Almost a decade had passed since then, and he had even forgotten that he was still registered when he got a call. He admitted it was a shock to get the call that he was somebody else's genetic match.

"I was very surprised," said Stacey. "I was taken aback, but I discussed it with my wife (Gayle) and I decided to go through with it."

It involved an induction process that painted out in painful detail what Stacey would have to go through if he donated. It included a procedure where surgeons would tap his bone marrow from his hip bone while under anaesthesia. Even if everything went well there could still be some complications for the recipient.

But he went ahead with it anyway.

And Herrington is still at a loss for words at the gift he gave to her. "He saved my life," she said simply.

While Stacey didn't get to meet his recipient right away, he was told she was doing well. But he wanted to know more.

But the guidelines said there was to be no direct contact with the recipient until two years after the procedure. That was to protect both the donor and the recipient from what is an intensely personal experience.

After that Stacey put out a feeler to see if Herrington was interested in corresponding. "I did want to know how she was doing," said Stacey.

He found that Herrington was equally interested in knowing something about him, so they connected by email and by phone for almost another year.

"I found out she was from Midland, which was amazing because she could have been from anywhere in the world," said Stacey. "I was overwhelmed because I could talk to her, and read her words and thoughts about how emotional it was for them.

"I also found how close to death she was."

Now tied together by blood, they finally decided to set up a face-to-face meeting for Aug. 27, the three-year anniversary of the donation.

"It's just bizarre now to think that my blood is her blood," said Stacey. "It's amazing to think that our DNA is very similar in terms of this, if not the same."

And what was it like to see her in person at a meeting held at the Grand River Health Centre?

"The first thing I felt was pride" said Stacey. "I was proud of her for what she had gone through and how she handled it.

"They called her Super Kid and I could see why."

Herrington also made an instant connection with Stacey, although the tears didn't come until she had to go home.

"He felt like family," she said. "It felt like I knew him forever."

Herrington and her mom, Cyndi, who joined her on the trip, have come up with a nickname of their own for her benefactor - Uncle Batman.

"I just glad to be part of her story," said Stacey. "But she's the exceptional one who is finishing school in the face of this illness and has now beaten leukemia and is thinking about her future.

"I just hope this makes all the caring people out there go out and register, and if that day should come, donate their bone marrow to someone else."

The donation gave Herrington back her life, she said.

She plans to study as a chef after graduating from high school. And she admits that might have something to do with all the hospital food she ate.

"I hope I don't have to eat that food again," she laughed.