



BE



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MATCH

## Bone Marrow Donation

by Marilyn Thomas

More than 8,000 miles away from Lexington, South Carolina, on a different hemisphere and continent, an 18-year-old from New Zealand stood poised to embark upon his young adult life. Those hopes, however, were overshadowed by a bleak diagnosis: chronic myeloid leukemia, a serious type of bone marrow cancer. His only chance of survival was to receive a bone marrow transplant; unfortunately, a close match was not readily available. Five years prior to this young man's devastating prognosis, a local resident named Ernie Yarborough decided to register with the Be The Match® bone marrow registry. His decision to do so would forever change the course of that young man's life.

For nearly 10 years, on Thursdays, Ernie Yarborough, a Citadel graduate, family man, insurance company owner, and lifelong resident of the greater Lexington area, has volunteered his time on the pediatric cancer floor at Prisma Health Children's Hospital. "Every day is an opportunity to make a difference," he says, and so he plays games and watches movies with the children just to offer a brief, happy diversion from the reason they are there.

"I was thinking one day about how much I enjoyed my childhood," says Mr. Yarborough. "Some of the simplest and most enjoyable times are when I was a kid, and you can just go outside and play without a care in the world. Kids battling cancer are missing out on that time of their lives. I just felt like I should do something to help. I am fortunate to have two healthy daughters."

Additionally, Mr. Yarborough has participated in ultra-endurance competitions to raise money for Camp KEMO, Prisma Health Children's Hospital, and the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society. In 2017, he set a new record by swimming for about eight hours while crossing almost 11 miles of Lake Murray. In conjunction with that achievement, he raised nearly \$90,000 for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society and was chosen as its

2017 South Carolina Midlands Man of the Year. In 2018, he also received the Nationwide Insurance National Community Service Award.

About five years ago, while volunteering at the children's hospital, Mr. Yarborough had befriended a "little buddy" named DJ, a patient who had been diagnosed with leukemia. When he needed a bone marrow transplant, a match could not be found, and the child eventually passed away.

"The best match is usually from a family member," says Mr. Yarborough. "Unfortunately, that doesn't always work out." Because of DJ's tragic and untimely death, Mr. Yarborough began asking questions about other available options, and, through the doctors and nurses who worked at the children's hospital, "I learned about an organization called Be The Match®, which is a bone marrow donor program. Through its national and international programs, Be The Match® has over 35 million potential donors."

According to its website, "Be The Match® is operated by the National Marrow Donor Program® and is the "world's leading nonprofit organization focused on saving lives through blood stem cell transplantation." It is also known as the largest and most diverse bone marrow donation registry currently in existence.

While Be The Match® covers the costs of the donation process, bone marrow donors must still satisfy certain criteria to be ac-

cepted as registrants. For example, donors must be between the ages of 18 and 60, meet established health guidelines, live in the United States or Puerto Rico, and be willing to donate to any patient in need. If ineligible, there are other ways to support the Be The Match® nonprofit organization, which includes contributing financially, donating cord blood, fundraising, volunteering, and/or raising awareness. The website at [bethematch.org](http://bethematch.org) provides additional information about every opportunity to become involved.

Statistics estimate that someone receives a blood-cancer diagnosis every three minutes, and for 70% of patients, there is no fully matched family donor. In those cases, Be The Match® may be their only hope for a compatible transplant. In 2018, the organization facilitated nearly 6,200 blood stem cell transplants, for a total of 92,000 transplants since 1987. This organization includes a "community of donors, volunteers, health care professionals, and researchers." It also raises money to fund research, assist with transplant costs, and enroll new marrow donors in its registry.

Shortly after Mr. Yarborough learned about this nonprofit, he found its website and filled out its online registration form. "About a week later, I got a confirmation packet in the mail with a mouth swab kit," he says. "I completed it, sent it back in, and prayed that one day I would be a match."

In July of 2020, Mr. Yarborough received that call when the voice on the other end asked, "Would you be willing to save a life?" and to this, he promptly replied, "Absolutely!"

"His prayers and my prayers were answered that day," says Mr. Yarborough. "We discussed the procedure, the effects on me, and the risks involved. I went through multiple physicals and blood tests [at a local physician's office] to make sure that I was indeed a match and that I was in good enough health to proceed with the bone marrow transplant."

"Because of privacy restrictions," explains Mr. Yarborough, "I do not know my recipient's true name. During the time leading up to the donation transplant, I recalled a Bible verse from the book of James. James 5:14 reads, 'Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord' (NIV). This verse stuck with me, so I named my recipient 'James.' Since then, 'James' has remained in my daily prayer list."

"While the risks for me were minimal," says Mr. Yarborough, "the biggest side effect would be the medication before the procedure. I had six days of shots leading up to the day of the transplant. (The daily shots leading up to the day of the procedure were done either at my office or at my home, depending on if it was a weekday or the weekend.) They made me nauseated, tired, and my body and bones ached all over." All of these symptoms are temporary and typical reactions in the preparation process.



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In this particular case, Mr. Yarborough was scheduled to provide a peripheral blood stem cell (PBSC) donation, a process that is similar to donating plasma. The American Cancer Society explains that the donor's "blood is removed through a catheter (a thin, flexible plastic tube) that's put in a large vein in the arm. It's then cycled through a machine that separates the stem cells from the other blood cells. The stem cells are kept, while the rest of the blood is returned to the donor. This

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process is called apheresis. It takes about 2 to 4 hours and is done as an outpatient procedure. Often the process needs to be repeated daily for a few days, until enough stem cells have been collected."

Just a few days before the procedure, Mr. Yarborough learned that the recipient of his bone marrow would be an 18-year-old male who lived in New Zealand. While battling chronic myeloid leukemia, the patient had undergone a series of cancer treatments, which were unsuccessful, so his best chance for survival would be receiving this transplant. Chronic myeloid leukemia (CML) can be fatal if not treated.

The American Cancer Society defines CML as "a type of cancer that starts from cells in the bone marrow that are supposed to grow into different types of blood cells. Most of the time, CML grows slowly, but over time the leukemia cells can spill out into the blood and spread to other parts of the body, like the spleen."

On September 14 and 15, 2020, Mr. Yarborough's donation was harvested at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston, and the procedure lasted a total of 13 hours. "Everything they took from my body was frozen and shipped to his hospital," he says. "According to the updates from Be The Match®, the transplant was successful on his end, and the patient is recovering and doing well."

"The minor side effects I experienced are nothing compared to what my recipient has already been through during his fight with cancer," adds Mr. Yarborough. "Donating was the least I could do to help. After two or three days, following the transplant, I felt great and back to normal. After two weeks following the transplant, I was back out running with my friends, like always."

"I have always enjoyed my volunteer work at the Children's Hospital, at Camp KEMO, and with the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society," concludes Mr. Yarborough, "but I often wonder if I'm truly making a difference. The feeling of being a bone marrow donor to a specific kid who now has a second chance in life is something I will never forget. I hope that my story will encourage others to register at BeTheMatch.org because, together, we can save lives." ■

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