

Mary Halet, a marrow donor's story

A marrow or umbilical cord blood transplant is a potentially life-saving treatment for patients with leukemia, lymphoma and other diseases of the blood and immune system. Patients who do not have a suitably matched donor in their family turn to the National Marrow Donor Program's Be The Match Registry to find an unrelated donor or cord blood unit.

Transplant recipients often describe their donors as "heroes," or "guardian angels." Donors often feel the same way about their recipients. This is true of Mary Halet, a director of Recruitment and Community Development for National Marrow Donor Program, who has donated all three cell sources used in transplantation: marrow, peripheral blood stem cells (PBSC) and her children's umbilical cord blood.

"I donated marrow in July 1993 to a 24-year-old woman with CML. I was 25 at the time and kept thinking how I would have to put my life on hold to fight a potentially fatal disease if it were me. Her life was just getting started, much like my own. Donating felt like the least I could do. It was an honor. The marrow collection was a cinch. I had a sore back—similar to a strain—but I went for a walk the day after the collection to loosen up. I donated on a Friday and rode my bike to work on Monday.

"In June 1994, I donated PBSC for the same patient. I think I was one of the first donors to undergo a PBSC donation for an unrelated transplant. Today, more than 75 percent of adult donors give PBSC, which is a non-surgical collection procedure, but at the time, the NMDP didn't have a protocol or even a consent form for PBSC collection. I had to use a consent form that U of M study participants were using.

For a PBSC collection, the donor receives a series of injections of a drug called filgrastim to move more blood forming cells from the bone marrow into the circulating blood. The filgrastim injections made me feel increasingly achy leading up to the collection, but my recovery afterward was just as fast as after the marrow donation. I felt 100 percent almost right away. I was also riding high on the emotional euphoria of knowing I may have saved someone's life.

"I corresponded with my recipient during the first 10 months, and I have saved her letters. Sadly, my recipient Kendra passed away. She was very ill when the second donation was requested and I knew she might not survive, but I went forward because I knew she was depending on me.

"I have met her family. Her mother made a wonderful memory book that includes all the letters I wrote to Kendra. I had an intense connection, almost like a kindred spirit, with someone I never met. Kendra's family and my family have grown very close. Kendra's mother told me I gave their family the one thing the doctors couldn't—hope.

"Umbilical cord is also a rich source of blood-forming stem cells, so I made up my mind to donate my daughter's cord blood to a public cord blood bank it would be available to

any searching patient. Being my first child, we left for the hospital in a rush and forgot the collection kit at home. I had my husband drive back through slick, snowy conditions to get it. By the time my son was born four years later, we were old pros, and everything went smoothly.

“Next to being a mother, being a donor is the greatest experience of my life. It changed my life. After the marrow donation I did a great deal of soul searching to find out what my purpose was in this world. I also re-connected with my spiritual side and joined a church. There was something awakened in me that I had not known before. I keep a picture at my desk of Kendra holding the bag of my donated marrow. She inspires me to do better. I’m here at the NMDP because of her. I’m very open about my donation experience and encourage anyone who is willing to make the commitment to join the registry.”

For additional background on transplant and donation please visit
<http://www.marlow.org/index.html>

If you are interested in joining the registry, please visit
<http://www.marlow.org/JOIN/index.html?src=tabjoin>