

DoD Marrow Donor Program gives young girl the gift of life

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NORFOLK, Va. -- Each day, thousands of people across America are in need of marrow transplants, and the C.W. Bill Young Department of Defense Marrow Donor Program is an important initiative that provides support for military personnel who volunteer as marrow donors.

Since the creation of the National Marrow Donor Program in 1986, more than six million Americans, including more than 400,000 service members, have registered as marrow donors.

It was this program that caught the interest of Aviation Boatswain's Mate (Launching and Recovery) 1st Class Jason R. Devitto, a native of San Jose, Calif., who is assigned to Carrier Airborne Early Warning Squadron 120 (VAW-120).

Devitto has served his country during multiple deployments in support of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but it wasn't until he was approached by National Bone Marrow Donor Program representatives in 2007 that he fathomed serving in a "healing" way.

"They took a little quick swab in my mouth," he said of the techniques used by technicians aboard the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN 69) who collected samples from service members. "Years later I found out that I was a match to somebody."

Devitto was first informed of a possible match in early October 2011 and was requested to undergo a series of screenings and blood tests to confirm he would be right as a donor.

"I was actually kind of shocked at the first phone call," he said. "I thought it was a joke, but they told me, 'No, you donated back in 2007.'"

In November 2011, blood kits were sent down to Norfolk to confirm the match.

"The program sent a couple of kits down to the clinic," said Devitto. "They sent the kits back up and I found a couple of days later that I was a match."

In mid-December 2011, Devitto was informed he would need to be available for extraction on Dec. 22, but due to timing issues he asked the doctors to re-schedule the procedure for mid-January 2012. As he thought about the procedure and its urgency, he decided to change his mind.

"I thought that this kid needs it right away," said Devitto. "So I called them back up and told them I would do it late around December 23."

Despite the approaching holidays, Devitto flew to Washington, D.C. for the standard pre-surgery prep at Georgetown University Medical Center. He admitted the pain from the surgery was intense.

"I was in pain, I really was," he said. "The doctors gave me enough medication to make me comfortable." Within a few hours, a piece of marrow was removed from his lower hip and was en route to a 14-year-old leukemia patient. While he wasn't thrilled about staying overnight in the hospital, Devitto was pleased to be able to walk out of the recovery room the next day. Unfortunately, he was unable to meet the recipient of the marrow, doctors were able to tell him some basic information.

"They could only tell me the age and the sex of the recipient," Devitto said, according to the program's guidelines. But he said he looks forward to meeting her after a year has passed and can release her name.

Recovered now, Devitto has nothing but positive things to say about his experience remarking and said, "They took very good care of me."

He had some lingering pain a few weeks after the surgery, but he still encourages other Sailors to participate.

"I don't regret any of it," he said. "I would definitely do it again if that's possible."

Registering as a marrow donor enables donors to give the most precious gift of all - the gift of life. There is a particularly urgent need for minority donors, but anyone in good health between the ages of 18 and 60 is welcomed.

To learn more about the C.W. Bill Young Department of Defense Marrow Donor Program, visit www.dodmarrow.org.