

Someone's Hero

Family Circle Magazine

Heather Millar
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Lots of people, it seems, could count on Jeff Olsen. In winter he would shovel his elderly neighbors' walks. He would always stop for stalled cars. He once even saved an injured sparrow hawk found near the lower Manhattan firehouse where he worked, spending days building a cage and feeding it, and later taking it to the vet.

As with many firefighters, helping was just something he did, like breathing. So Jeff didn't think much about it when in 1999, as a probationary firefighter at the Fire Department of New York Fire Academy, he had his blood tissue-typed and became registered as a potential bone marrow donor. He even forgot to tell his wife.

"I was going through papers one afternoon and asked, 'What's this about being in the National Marrow Donor Program Registry?'" remembers Denise Olsen, 33. "He said he had to get his blood drawn anyway, so why not put his name in the registry? I joked that he would be the one to get called."

Denise, a nurse, knew that donated bone marrow, which produces healthy blood cells, could give hope of survival to the more than 30,000 people a year diagnosed with leukemia and other blood diseases.

It took only one year for Jeff to be chosen as an almost perfect match for one young patient, 17-year-old Richard Epps. His mother, Loretta, couldn't be more grateful: Richard was suffering from severe aplastic anemia and would likely die without a transplant.

It all began for the Epps family on a Thursday afternoon in February 2000. Richard was visiting a nursing home with a school charity group when he became ill. His worried algebra teacher drove him home.

The following Sunday evening, Loretta remembers, Richard came down the stairs of their townhouse "looking as if all the blood had drained out of him." The 35-year-old mother left a batch of half-cooked fried chicken in the pan, loaded her family into a taxi and made a beeline for Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Richard collapsed while walking down a hall after checking in.

Loretta's oldest son—a "good kid" who stayed out of trouble, kept up his grades and worshiped Los Angeles Lakers basketball star Kobe Bryant—was critically ill. Richard's diseased bone marrow had stopped producing all three types of blood cells: red, which carry oxygen and nutrients; platelets, which allow wounds to heal by helping blood to clot; and white, which fight disease. His only hope was a bone marrow transplant.

Bone marrow, a substance found in the cavities of bones, is a rich source of the stem cells that produce these blood cells. Once the patient has undergone chemotherapy to destroy the diseased marrow cells, new stem cells—commonly extracted from the pelvic bones of a donor—are transfused to the patient. With luck, they will find their way into the patient's bone cavities, grow and begin producing healthy blood cells.

But it's not always easy finding a donor. At least five of six chemical markers must match between donor and recipient for a transplant to have a good chance of success. Richard had an extra hurdle because he is African-American. While matches are most commonly found within the same family or racial group, relatively few African-Americans have had their blood tissue-typed—just over 373,300 out of the 4.6 million registered potential donors.

As they waited and hoped, Loretta watched her once-healthy teenager fade. Richard lost his hair and could not even muster the energy for a shower. Chemotherapy caused sores in his mouth and throat. Eating became so painful that he dropped from 140 pounds to just 105. Allergic reactions to blood platelet transfusions made him shake and sweat. Normally quiet, Richard grew depressed and stopped speaking entirely. "I wouldn't wish that ordeal on my worst enemy," Loretta says.

Then word came in late summer that a donor had surfaced. "I was relieved, but I was scared," Loretta says. "I thought, If this doesn't work, will he survive long enough for us to put him back on the list?"

Denise, meanwhile, remembers being really excited when husband Jeff, a father with three young children, got a call informing him that he was a match. "There was never any question that he would do it," says Denise. "I mean, a child is sick. How could you say no?"

After more testing, in October 2000 Jeff, with Denise and a childhood friend, went to Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York City. Jeff, then 30, knew that the procedure—doctors would use a special needle to extract the marrow from his pelvic bones—would take about three hours and leave him sore. Yet his only worry was the anesthesia; he had never had it before.

"Afterward, they asked us if we wanted to send an anonymous note with the marrow," says Denise. "Jeff didn't want to. He didn't need a pat on the back. He didn't need to know who they were. But I was dying to know who the recipient was, so I wrote the note. I wrote that Jeff was a wonderful husband and father, and that we were so glad to be able to do something so important."

For the next year Loretta nervously watched Richard's blood counts, and Denise kept calling the National Marrow Donor Program for updates. "Jeff said just let it be," Denise remembers. "But I just thought the whole process was so amazing. I said, 'Do you realize he's going to have your exact blood in his veins? Not even our children have that.'"

Very slowly, Richard's blood cell counts crept toward normal. Richard started talking about growing up to be a hematologist, a doctor specializing in blood diseases. When Denise called again late in the summer of 2001, the NMDP told her that Richard's blood had been converted to her husband's blood type. That meant there was a good chance Richard would be cured.

But, Loretta says, when "October came and went," marking the one-year anniversary of the transplant—when donor and recipient families may contact each other directly—she was surprised that she hadn't heard from the Olsens. Then, in late November, the hospital's marrow donor coordinator called the Epps family. "Miss Epps?" she said. "I just have to tell you that the donor died. He was killed on September eleventh."

Jeff Olsen, wearing 100 pounds of gear—fire helmet, coat, pants, oxygen mask, extinguisher and ceiling hook—was walking up stairwell B of the World Trade Center's north tower when the building collapsed. At home, Denise stared at the TV, sensing instantly that Jeff was gone.

At first, shock, grief and the relentless demands of three small children and a bustling household consumed Denise. It would be weeks before it would occur to her that a part of Jeff lived on, not just as a memory, or a legacy, but as something physical.

The recipient of Jeff's bone marrow survived, she thought not long after her husband's memorial service in October. Even before the horror of September 11th, Denise was eager to meet him. Now she knew she had to do it.

Seven months later they planned to meet at a firehouse in Brooklyn, a modest brick cube that is the home of Engine 246, Ladder 169 company. It was where Jeff was working when he donated marrow.

Jeff's firefighter friends, on hand the afternoon that Denise was to meet Richard, started reminiscing about Jeff. "Always had a smile. Loved coming to work. Took it seriously. Funny. Eager. Wanted to get out there and fight fires. Knocked down a door, flames all around, and saved a family."

Jeff's absence still weighs heavily at Engine 246, Ladder 169. It was there that Jeff cooked his signature chili (secret: put in half a bottle of beer, drink the other half), joked at picnics and holiday parties, trained for danger and became part of the fire department's uncommon brotherhood. Jeff would later rotate to another company and then, fatefully, to the firehouse across from the World Trade Center.

His picture, and those of four others who once worked at Engine 246, Ladder 169 and who also died September 11th, is in the stairwell leading up to the locker room, along with a mosaic of painted bricks, one for each of the 343 firefighters who died. The firefighters have virtually adopted Denise and her three children—Vincent, nine; Tori Rose, four; and Noah, two. During the first months they shopped, cooked and did errands for them. These days they help with the home projects that Jeff, the perfectionist, had planned and cursed about: sodding the yard, putting Sheetrock up in the basement. "It helps us to help them," says firefighter Jimmy Lowe, who, like half a dozen others there, considered Jeff a best friend.

"I love coming here," Denise said as she held Noah and tried to calm her nervousness. "The kids love coming here. It's a way of being connected to their dad." This meeting was unlike most. Donor-recipient meetings usually inspire unalloyed joy. But that day mourning intruded. How do you give thanks for your son and offer condolences in the same moment?

Loretta and Denise shook hands, then embraced. Richard stood to one side, then gave Denise a heartfelt bear hug. Laverne Edwards, Richard's godmother, leaned down to Vincent. "Your Daddy was really something special," she said. "If it wasn't for him, we wouldn't have Richard." Vincent nodded seriously. Here and there, big-muscled men who were Jeff's comrades brushed back tears.

After introductions Denise led Richard's family inside the firehouse, where firefighters had mounted a large portrait of Jeff in his dress uniform and a collage of family snapshots: Jeff in his wedding tux, still sporting the luxurious wavy ponytail felled by fire department regulations; Jeff at the births of his children; Jeff holding a fish, just like the picture that adorned his Mass card.

Richard stood at attention, looking over his mother's shoulder. Loretta held a tissue but didn't use it. She seemed rooted in place. A tear rolled silently down her cheek. Later, Denise and Loretta took a private moment while the men were getting lunch ready. "There were so many things I wanted to tell Jeff," Loretta says. "I wanted to tell him thank you, to give him a big hug. He didn't ask who his donation might save, or what the color of that person's skin was. I just thank God for him. To have it in his heart to do something like this, I can just imagine the kind of giving person he was, the love he had."

Says Richard, "He didn't ask questions. He just gave his marrow. People aren't usually like that—that generous." He says he had wanted to meet Jeff. "I just wanted to say, 'Thank you for what you did.'"

Over heaping plates of manicotti, rigatoni and chicken, the conversation lightened. Denise encouraged Richard to keep playing basketball. Richard talked about the NBA finals, then went with Vincent to shoot hoops. "Let me tell you, Denise," said Loretta as the table thinned out, "Richard's own father wouldn't get his blood tested. And here, you have a stranger do it."

At 1:52 p.m., a "ticket" came in. It was a call for Jeff's old rig, Engine 246. The alarm tone sounded. Firefighters scrambled. Richard stood by the kitchen door in his new FDNY baseball cap. His eyes grew a little wider. Typically, he didn't say anything. Tentatively, he walked toward the rig, then looked over his shoulder at his godmother. He flashed a big grin.

"That means he's really excited," she said. "At his age they don't like to show emotion, that they're excited. But he is." Then Engine 246, the "Fightin' Brighton," rumbled out of the firehouse, sirens wailing. In that moment, perhaps the boy's heart raced, pumping the blood that came from the fallen firefighter. And perhaps Richard Epps got to meet Jeff Olsen after all.

This is For You, Elaine Mark D. Kwalwasser truly believes that his oldest sister, Elaine, died from leukemia so that other people could live. "Thinking that keeps me sane, it keeps me going," he says.

Mark, a retired New York City firefighter, has been busy recruiting potential bone marrow donors throughout the department—first, unsuccessfully, for his sister in 1989 and 1990, and now, in her memory, for other patients who would likely die without a marrow transplant. To date, nearly 50 New York City firefighters have donated marrow to help save a life. Several have done so twice.

Elaine always took care of her four younger siblings. She once ripped up her own shirt to use as a bandage after Mark was cut in the head by a thrown bottle. Elaine grew up to become a maternity nurse, marry William Diedrich, and have four children. Then she got sick.

As Elaine's leukemia grew worse, her only hope was a bone marrow transplant. If it worked, it would allow her own marrow to begin producing healthy blood cells.

Thirteen years ago, when the procedure was new, there were few potential donors. So Mark began speaking to Fire Academy classes, urging the probationary firefighters to have their blood tissue-typed. (Doctors perform a transplant only when proteins found on the surface of white blood cells, which determine tissue type, match between donor and recipient.) "I remember talking to my sister on the phone, looking out the window in tears because we couldn't find a match," says Mark. But after Elaine died in 1990, he kept speaking at the Fire Academy, trying to recruit potential bone marrow donors. He named his effort the Elaine Diedrich Memorial Donor Program.

"I keep saying to myself, This is for you, Elaine," says Mark. "We tell them that more than 60 diseases can be cured by transplants," says Jay Weinstein, a firefighter who helps with the Fire Academy presentations. He signed up as a potential donor, but was later diagnosed with leukemia and now might need a transplant himself.

Firefighter Carl Bedigian had just donated marrow to a nine-year-old boy when he met his future wife, Michele, 32. "He was excited about it because it was a child," she says.

The couple was married less than a year when Carl was killed at the World Trade Center. Since then, Michele has begun to think of the marrow donation more and more. It comforts her to know that a part of Carl circulates through the veins of a nine-year-old somewhere overseas. "I think of that little boy all the time," she says. "I know the spirit that Carl had, and Carl's blood is running through him. If that little boy is smiling, Carl is smiling."

To date, some 7,500 firefighters have been recruited as potential donors. Now Mark, with the National Marrow Donor Program, the Marrow Foundation and the New York Blood Center, is helping other fire departments around the country find donors in a new program called "Be Someone's Hero."

"Firefighters make great donors. They're healthy, young, easy to locate and willing," says Melinda Camp, director and donor center coordinator for the New York Blood Center. "A firefighter's job is to save lives. We give them another opportunity to do that. I think it's important to know that these guys weren't just heroes on September 11, they were heroes every day." —Heather Millar

Thank You, Mr. Nice Man

In the summer of 1994 firefighter Terry Farrell sat down to lunch in an 87th floor office suite at the World Trade Center with a six-year-old girl who was visiting him from Nevada. While they shared deli sandwiches, he pointed out the Statue of Liberty to her. They watched the Goodyear blimp float by at eye level.

Chantyl Peterson couldn't have been more excited. Usually shy, she had given Terry a huge hug when she had first met him just a few days before. She was finally getting to spend some time with Terry—or "Mr. Nice Man," in her mind.

Chantyl had reason to feel connected to Terry: He had donated some of his bone marrow to save her from the blood cancer that had been killing her. Terry, a soft-hearted father of two, whose brothers would tease that he cried at supermarket openings, took easily to Chantyl.

It was 1989 and Terry was about to graduate from the New York City Fire Department Fire Academy when he was asked to volunteer as a potential bone marrow donor. Terry didn't hesitate; his nephew had just been diagnosed with leukemia. Nor did he hesitate in 1993 when he matched as a donor for Chantyl. The marrow cells Terry donated cured her of two deadly diseases: acute aplastic anemia and T-cell lymphoma.

A year later Chantyl and her family went to New York to celebrate. The firefighter was eager to meet Chantyl and to recruit new marrow donors for others. "Terry really believed in this bone marrow recruiting effort," remembers his older brother, Brian. "He would do it on his own time, on his own nickel. It was pretty impressive."

Over a couple of days Terry and Chantyl exchanged hugs and presents, and shared a ride on an FDNY fire truck. In a New York City suburb they went to a picnic with the Dix Hills Fire Department, where Terry served as a volunteer assistant chief. At Christmas that year the families exchanged cards, and three years ago the Petersons again visited Terry in New York.

As soon as Chantyl's mother, Sheri, heard about the terrorist attacks, she started calling the Farrells' number. She knew that the man her daughter considered a second father was a member of FDNY Rescue Squad 4, which is called to help when the responding firefighters are in trouble. The phone rang and rang.

Sheri finally got through the next morning. Meanwhile, Chantyl—at 13, an A student—was getting ready for school. She left her room, where pictures of Terry hung above her piano keyboard and horse models. She hovered in her mother's bathroom, listening. As Sheri hung up, Chantyl sensed something was wrong. "Does Terry need my help?" she asked. "Does he need my blood?"

For weeks, Chantyl prayed all day, every day, pleading for the safety of Terry, who was among those missing in the rubble of the fallen towers. More than a month later her parents sat Chantyl down to tell her that firefighters had found Terry.

"They did?" Chantyl squealed excitedly. "No, they found his body," her mother said.

Instantly, the seventh-grader fell silent. Then she started sobbing.

The Petersons weren't sure they could make it to Terry's funeral. Sheri, a cocktail waitress in Las Vegas, lost her job when tourism slumped after September 11th. The family of five was struggling, but New York firefighters stepped in and raised \$3,000 to cover the Petersons' expenses.

Terry's donation to Chantyl was mentioned several times during his funeral Mass. Wearing a deep purple velveteen dress, Chantyl read a portion of the closing prayer. Following hundreds of other mourners at the burial site, Chantyl tearfully placed a red carnation on his casket.

"I think about Terry a lot," says Chantyl. "If it weren't for him, I wouldn't be here today. I wouldn't be able to do all the stuff that kids do."

Says Sheri, "I didn't talk to him every day, or socialize with him, but I still had a love for him. I consider my kids a gift from God. And that's what Terry was: He was a gift from God to us."

Terry will live on not only through Chantyl—and his two children, T.J., 15, and Rebecca, 8—but as an inspiration for others to join the mission that he felt so important: recruiting bone marrow donors who may save the lives of others.

Retired firefighter Mark Kwalwasser—who for 13 years has been recruiting donors in memory of his sister, Elaine Diedrich—has renamed the New York portion of his campaign the Elaine Diedrich/Terrence P. Farrell Memorial Donor Program.

In the days after his funeral, Terry's five brothers started talking about a fitting memorial and came up with a marrow donor drive among firefighters and police officers on the outskirts of New York City. They partnered with the Long Island Marrow Organization, which has raised \$100,000 to pay for the tissue-typing for these potential donors.

"We're taking a good deed to the next generation," says Dennis, Terry's oldest brother. "I can see Terry up there somewhere saying, 'That's a nice idea. You're going to feel good.'"—Heather Millar FC