

Be the Match: How donating your bone marrow can be the most rewarding thing you've ever done

January 29, 2020

Donating blood or plasma is something most people are familiar with or have even done. But donating your bone marrow is an unknown process for most people. While most are aware that bone marrow transplants are possible and happen, few know how to donate, how it works, and what it can do.

In January of 2018, Andrew Schmitz, a 12-year-old boy from Cedarburg, received a life saving bone marrow transplant in Milwaukee. The following is the firsthand experience of Anni Roming, Andrew's previously anonymous bone marrow donor from Maine.

Andrew's parents, Mike and Paula Schmitz, co-own and operate Little Switzerland Ski Area in Slinger, WI. On February 22, 2020, Little Switzerland will be holding a charity event benefiting Be The Match, the non-profit national marrow donor program.

Anni's story explains the process and what it meant to her.

The lottery of a lifetime!

May 13, 2006: My longtime boyfriend told me we were going to brunch. He drove us to the local hospital. I wasn't too keen on hospital food, but I trusted his judgement. He told me we were both going to be swabbed for Be The Match... I said, "Sure, but it's going to cost you a mimosa!"

Fast forward to 2012: Be The Match called and said I was a match for a little boy, but then the process stopped; my recipient was unable to undergo the procedure. I wondered what had happened and prayed that he was healthy and that my marrow wasn't needed.

5 years later, December 19, 2017: Be The Match called me on the way home from work and said that I was still a match and if we could get all the tests done, the procedure was to take place on the 11th of January 2018. I was so happy! They asked so many questions and gave me many chances to bow out. But I was so happy to hear that I was a match and that the little boy was ready for the procedure.

I went to a bunch of hospitals to take tests (the weirdest one was how large my veins were like I was on match.com for Dracula), and make sure I was healthy enough and wouldn't introduce anything bad to my recipient. The tests were all easy and painless.

The tests were done in time, and all the results came out good and I felt like I had already received more than I gave.... Who knew that 4,261 days after a detour on the way to brunch, I would be getting such a great opportunity to help another human being with my bone marrow?

January 10, 2018: My Daughter in Law and I flew to Georgetown, Virginia. We went to the hospital in the morning and told her to go to visit the National Zoo, as it may take a while (only 45 minutes). Next thing I knew I was prepped, and a doctor was explaining what would happen and then lights out. I woke up with a bandage on my

backside that was the size of a Subway sandwich. I told the nurse that was the worst butt implant I had ever seen. She thought I was funny. I stayed the night and was good as new the next day.

I was worried that “my recipient” would awake from his procedure with all of my bad habits! I thought that maybe he would ask for a glass of wine and start telling dirty jokes with a Maine accent...

Saturday January 13, 2018: My flight home was on time and I asked for a wheelchair and first-class service expedited us to the departure gate. Once in Maine, I drove the 1.5 hours home in time to watch the Patriots win a football game. I had no problems driving or sitting; just wondering. How did the procedure go for the little boy? Was it as easy as it was for me? Did my marrow help him? Again, I prayed.

Now the wait. The rules are that since my recipient was under 18, I would have to be granted parental approval to know who my recipient was. What a long wait... even though it was just a little over a year.

Monday, February 11, 2019: I came home from work and opened my mail. There was a letter from Be The Match: a consent form. I was so happy I could hardly contain myself!

I filled out the paperwork and sent it back in as soon as I could and sent The Schmitz Family an email letting them know who I was. I was afraid they would think I wanted something in return, I only wanted to know how their little boy was doing. Paula was amazing and told me all the heartbreaking history before the procedure. The best news was that Andrew was alive well and doing great! She said he was 100% me – I was so happy. I told everyone what I did. It had been a secret up until this time.

Andrew and I now share something in common. We will meet someday, either in Maine or in Wisconsin, and I can't wait. I encourage everyone to join; this could be your lottery of a lifetime.

-Anni Roming

Andrew Schmitz is now a teenager. When he was two years old, he started having unexplained fevers and rashes. After years of traveling the country for answers, five strokes, multiple brain surgeries, and relentless seizures, Andrew was diagnosed with a rare, life threatening disease called DADA2.

In fall of 2017, the Schmitz family was facing a tough decision on whether to perform another surgery to try to stop seizures when everything was put on hold. Doctors found that Andrew's immune system was failing. Without immediate action, he may not survive.

The process of a bone marrow transplant was immediately initiated. For the Schmitz Family, it was a nerve testing waiting game. Be the Match was working with Children's Hospital of Wisconsin to find the right donor. Because of privacy laws, Paula and Mike [Andrew's parents] had to wait patiently without knowing much. They were told there were multiple matches for Andrew, and that they were contacting them to see if they were still willing to donate.

Halfway across the country Anni never hesitated. She performed a selfless act to save the life of someone she never met. In January of 2017, Andrew began his transplant. Paula stayed by his side on an isolated floor of Children's Hospital praying that the transplant would work. A bone marrow transplant essentially resets the recipient's immune system.

Andrew's positive attitude and courage coupled with Anni's selfless act proved to be the combination that saved Andrew's life. The procedure was a huge success, and while Andrew continues to fight other effects of DADA2, he might not have had the chance if not for Be the Match, Anni Roming, and the wonderful doctors and nurses at Children's Hospital.

While Andrew was lucky to receive a perfect match and successful transplant, many patients aren't so lucky. Anni's Story not only provides a blueprint for the donation process, it explains how donating can be the most rewarding experience you may ever do.

Little Switzerland in Slinger, WI has partnered with Be the Match to help raise awareness and funds for this great organization. Be the Match not only helps connect patients with life-saving bone marrow, they also conduct relentless research, work to grow the registry, support families and donors through the process, and provide legislative advocacy to protect patient access to care.

On Saturday, February 22, as part of Little Switzerland's annual Cheese Shred fundraiser, the ski area is holding a donation drive all day. Support financially with direct donations, silent auctions and raffles, or by skiing late night for a special 10pm to 1am session where all lift ticket proceeds will be donated to Be the Match. Visit littleswitz.com/cheeseshred for more information on the Cheese Shred event and bethematch.org for more information on Be the Match.