

Jacob's Ladder organizers honored for donor registry work for minorities

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STAFF WRITER

When Jacob Gunnells was diagnosed with an aggressive form of leukemia in April 1993, hope was all his family had. Hope that he would find a suitable bone-marrow donor. Hope that he would live.

Jacob did live. After months of searching, he found a suitable donor from a donor registry in the Netherlands. He is now a healthy 13-year-old living in Raleigh.

But his aunt, Sharon O'Donnell of Cary, has not forgotten how hope sustained her family through the uncertainty of Jacob's fate.

"Hope really has such a meaning when you're searching for [donor] matches," Ms. O'Donnell said.

But, as Ms. O'Donnell discovered, not all families faced with leukemia have a reason to hope. She remembers when one of Jacob's doctors was asked if Jacob could find a donor to save his life.

"The doctor said, 'Probably so, but it'll take some time. But if he were a minority, this would be a death sentence,'" Ms. O'Donnell said.

The problem is that proper donor matches rarely occur across racial lines. In the United States, of all registered donors, only 7.5 percent are African American, 6.8 percent Hispanic, 5.4 percent Asian American, and 1.3 percent Native American. For leukemia sufferers of those races, the odds of finding a proper match are daunting.

"We couldn't imagine having a child we love so much without the hope," Ms. O'Donnell said.

So Ms. O'Donnell set out to help boost the number of minority donors, along with three other people — Paul and C.J. Stock of Raleigh and Gayle Butzgy, who Ms. O'Donnell said is in the process of moving from Raleigh to Cary.

AT A GLANCE

A Marrowthon to add more donors to the bone-marrow donor list will be held tomorrow, Thursday, June 26 at the American Red Cross office in Cary. The office is located at 305-A Ashville Ave.

Adults ages 18 to 60 in good health can have their blood tested and add their names to the national donor registry from 11 a.m. to 7:30 p.m.

They have carried on Jacob's Ladder, the organization formed to help Jacob find a match. They are now preparing for their third "Marrowthon" drive to add people to the donor registry.

And Jacob's Ladder has held drives specifically for minorities — at Martin Luther King Day events, in African American churches, at Native American and Hispanic cultural events, within Asian American students groups, and at a Hindu temple.

The group also arranged for Darius Rucker, the African-American lead singer of the pop band Hootie and the Blowfish, to make an appearance and register as a donor at last year's Marrowthon.

For its efforts, the 6th Biennial Symposium on Minorities, the Medically Underserved, & Cancer presented Jacob's Ladder with one of its four HOPE awards in April.

"The bottom line is that Jacob's Ladder was among those who were

chosen because the selection committee really thought it represented the best of what can be done in the community ... to save lives," said T.J. Dunlap, the director of the symposium.

Ms. Dunlap said over 65,000 groups had an opportunity to be considered for the awards. By the time local selections had been made, the symposium's selection committee had about 30 candidates to choose from, Ms. Dunlap said.

"One thing that impressed [the selection committee] was how one family crisis really then was turned into a very positive response to a need in the community," Ms. Dunlap said.

"Also, that this family and their friends took it even a step further and tried to help the most needy" in terms of finding bone-marrow donor matches, Ms. Dunlap said.

Ms. Dunlap said Ms. O'Donnell gave a moving, rousing speech at the symposium about the history of Jacob's Ladder and the need for bone-marrow donors.

The HOPE award — a green marble statuette — now sits on Jacob's mantle.

More than 7,000 people have joined the donor registry through drives organized by Jacob's Ladder. This year's Marrowthon will be the first to have a location in Cary — the American Red Cross office at 305-A Ashville Ave. The drive will be held tomorrow, June 26, from 11 a.m. to 7:30 p.m.

People 18 to 60 in good health can have their blood tested and add their name to the national donor registry. This procedure normally costs \$60 or more, but will be free during the Marrowthon.