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***Charity is just in his bones* / Houston man saves lives of strangers by giving his marrow**

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Staff

Gary Lassin has the kind of charisma and personality that draw strangers his way.

You feel comfortable chatting with him, as if you had known him for years. He's an easygoing guy who'll give you the shirt off his back.

Or the marrow in his *bones*.

Last month, the 47-year-old Houstonian donated a possibly lifesaving gift of bone marrow for the second time, this time to a 53-year-old man with leukemia - a stranger.

Five years ago, his bone marrow saved the life of a young Michigan woman who was also suffering from leukemia. At the time she was a stranger, too.

After she became a friend, his blood saved her again.

His selfless acts make Lassin an example of rare generosity, a standout even in this season of giving. They also make him a statistical rarity.

Of those who have given bone marrow for the 10,594 marrow transplants done around the world since 1986, only 198, or less than 2 percent, have donated a second time to a different person, according to the National Marrow Donor Program.

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In 1992 Lassin was an entrepreneur in his hometown of Philadelphia.

One Friday evening, he was thumbing through a Jewish community newspaper and saw an article about an effort to find a donor for a young boy who needed a bone-marrow transplant to survive.

He had read those stories before. And like most people, he felt sadness before moving on to other articles.

"But for some reason I didn't pass (this story) by like I usually would," recalls Lassin, now a mentor to Internet start-up and other high-tech companies. "Something struck me about what a great thing it would be to do something for this boy."

That Sunday, he went to have his blood tested and agreed to become part of the international registry of donors maintained by the National Marrow Donor Program.

Then he waited.

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He wasn't called to donate for the young boy. He wasn't a match, and he doesn't know what happened to the boy.

Three years went by, and he continued his career starting businesses in Philadelphia.

He all but forgot about the registry.

One day in May 1995, he walked into his office, and his secretary gave him an urgent message: He matched a person needing a bone-marrow transplant.

"It threw me for a bit of a loop," Lassin says. "I was sort of stunned, because I was caught off-guard. It was kind of scary. I didn't know what to expect."

He underwent tests to check whether the six antigens found on his white blood cells matched the six on the awaiting recipient's cells. An exact match reduces the chance that the recipient's body will reject the donor's bone marrow.

"The six have to match up. It's like a lottery ticket," says Becky McCullough, manager of the marrow-donor program at the Gulf Coast Regional Blood Center in Houston.

Lassin matched six of six.

He was briefed on the surgery he would undergo: Small punctures are made in both sides of the pelvis, and needles are inserted to harvest the marrow.

Risks are minimal, mainly related to general anesthesia, to which some people have bad reactions. The recipient's insurance pays for the transplant; there is no cost to the donor.

Still, fear had entered Lassin's mind. He recalled how, when he was young, he had been scared to death of doctors and needles.

"The fear is that you're going into surgery when you don't really have to," he says. "Something can happen that alters your life in a bad way. I had the fear and the thoughts, but in spite of them there was never the consideration to not do this. I was committed to doing it."

In September 1995, Lassin checked into the hospital for the procedure. He chose to have local rather than general anesthesia.

Two liters of marrow fluid were taken from 10 puncture holes in his pelvis.

"I looked like a domino," Lassin jokes.

He stayed one night for recovery. Harvesting is usually done on a Friday so donors can recuperate over the weekend and be back at work Monday. Donors recover fully within three to four weeks.

"You're tender for at least several days," Lassin says.

He couldn't drive for a few days, and when he did he had to use a pillow to soften his seating.

Donors, who are told nothing about the recipient except age, gender and disease, are given the option of writing an anonymous letter that will accompany the marrow to the recipient.

In his letter, Lassin wrote about a recent dream in which he had saved a woman's life. He attributed the dream to his upcoming donation.

"To me she symbolizes you," Lassin wrote. "I envision my marrow in your body circulating, settling and beginning to produce a vibrant and healthy supply of blood with all of the necessary components in perfect balance and harmony.

"This now is yours. Working to build you back to perfect health and a lifetime with all that you desire."

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In 1986, Sheryl Schenck was 25, living in Clawson, Mich., *just* north of Detroit, and making plans for her upcoming wedding.

She needed a blood test for her marriage license.

On June 13 (yes, it was a Friday), her doctor called to say the test results were abnormal and that additional testing showed she had leukemia. A bone biopsy confirmed it as Philadelphia positive-chromosome chronic myelogenous leukemia.

Schenck went ahead with her marriage, but she and her husband decided to postpone having children because she would be undergoing chemotherapy.

At a checkup, Schenck told her doctor she was feeling fine, but he told her the leukemia was getting worse. "My doctor said he knew a storm was coming," she recalls.

He sent her to a specialist at the University of Michigan. In May 1995, the specialist concluded she needed a bone-marrow transplant. He gave her a one-in-three chance of surviving the transplant.

Schenck took those odds.

"There was no question in my mind. I was going to do whatever I had to do," she says.

A search for a donor began.

Within two months, Lassin, the Philly native, matched the woman with Philadelphia positive-chromosome CML.

"I was very fortunate - very lucky," Schenck says.

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On her 35th birthday - Sept. 11, 1995 - Schenck entered the hospital. Tests checked her heart and lungs.

Then she would be subjected to seven days of chemotherapy to destroy diseased marrow in preparation for an intravenous transfusion of the donated marrow, which would build a new immune system in her bone marrow.

On Sept. 20, the intravenous transplant process began. It took 10 hours, lasting into the next morning.

"I was pretty excited," Schenck recalls. "It was the start of something new."

If things went well, the stem cells from Lassin would travel through her bloodstream to the marrow spaces, where they would begin to grow and provide healthy new blood cells. The process takes three to four weeks. During this time, Schenck was vulnerable to infections and remained hospitalized.

All the while, doctors were watching for signs that her body was accepting the transplant bone marrow, a process called engraftment.

It took.

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A year after the transplant, in accordance with transplant rules, Schenck and Lassin were allowed to know each other's identities.

She wrote first, two handwritten pages thanking him for saving the life of a stranger. He wrote back. They sent pictures of themselves and their families.

Schenck saw Lassin's curly, thick, black and white hair. That explained it.

"When my hair came back in, it came in black and white, curly and thick," she says with a laugh. "I've always been a brunette with straight, fine hair."

Molly Ferris, spokeswoman for the National Marrow Donor Program, says that although there is no scientific explanation, such instances of taking on a donor's characteristics do occur with bone-marrow transplants.

Schenck's hair has since reverted to brown, although it remains thick.

She also inherited another Lassin trait: clumsiness.

"I asked Gary if he's always dropping things, and he said yes," Schenck says.

Just when things started getting better, they suddenly took a turn for the worse.

In February 1998, Schenck's husband, Al, died from melanoma, a form of skin cancer.

On the third anniversary of her transplant, Schenck had a routine bone biopsy.

The leukemia was back.

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Schenck and her doctors would call on Lassin to help her again.

This time, doctors decided to take white blood cells from Lassin and transfuse them into her, hoping it would force the leukemia back into remission.

It worked.

Schenck, now 40, has been free of leukemia for almost two years.

"A year is a milestone, and each year thereafter is even better," Ferris says.

After almost three years of letters and phone calls, it was time to meet Lassin, the man who had twice given of himself to keep her alive.

In February 1999, Lassin was in Michigan on business. The meeting place was Mountain Jack's Steakhouse in Troy.

Schenck, who works in accounting for an advertising agency, stood in the waiting area with her mother, stepfather, sister and brother-in-law and a friend.

The door opened, she turned, and she and Lassin immediately spotted each other. They hugged.

It was that evening they realized they shared the same blood, the identical immune system.

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In August 2000, Lassin married and moved to Houston to be with his wife, Arlene.

Less than a month into his new life, he received an e-mail: Another patient needed his bone marrow.

"You're not going to believe this," read the e-mail from Jason Gangewere, marrow coordinator for the American Red Cross in Philadelphia. "You matched another patient. I'm not kidding."

Lassin smiled when he read the e-mail.

"I was really excited," he says. "There's no greater satisfaction that I get than when there's something I do that positively affects or changes someone else."

His wife had concerns. At times she didn't want him to do it. But she reminded herself of one of the reasons she fell in love with him: his generosity.

"He gives better than he receives," Arlene Lassin says. "It's part of his nature."

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On Nov. 9, doctors at Houston's Methodist Hospital made three small holes in Lassin's pelvis to remove bone marrow. It took two hours, and Lassin was home that afternoon.

He wrote a letter to the recipient.

"This is my second experience as a donor," he wrote. "I donated a number of years ago to a young woman in need of a marrow transplant. My wife and I spent four days with her on our recent honeymoon. She is healthy today, and my thoughts today are on a time down the road when we may share that same experience."

When Schenck heard of Lassin's second donation, she admired him even more, if that was possible.

"He must have pretty amazing blood and bone marrow. What he's done is fantastic," she says. "Without him, I don't know where I'd be. He's a wonderful person with a heart of gold."

"I only wish my husband had been able to meet him, because he would feel the same way."

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The second recipient of Lassin's bone marrow is still alive. The first 100 days after a transplant are considered critical. He's almost halfway there.

"I always thought the opportunity to donate was a gift," Lassin says. "You can want to save someone's life or make a difference, but when do you actually get that opportunity? I hope I can do this as many more times as physically possible."

Donors are kept on the international registry up to age 61. That gives Lassin 14 more years to possibly match and donate to another stranger.

He'd like nothing better.

Fact box

More than 4 million potential donors are on the international registry maintained by the National Marrow Donor Program. Of the 50,000 registered in the Houston area, 77 have donated bone marrow.

At any given time, there are about **3,000** people worldwide searching the registry for a bone-marrow donor match.

About 130 bone-marrow transplants are performed each month around the world.

For information, call the National Marrow Donor Program at 800-627-7692 or visit the Web sites www.marrow.org or www.nmdp.org.

To register locally, call the Gulf Coast Regional Blood Center at 713-791-6697. There is no cost to register. The center especially needs Hispanics, African-Americans and other minorities to register.