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DURHAM, N.H. – When Amira Kabbara went to a bone marrow drive in the spring of 2009, she never expected she’d be a match. The odds, she was told, were about 25,000 to one.

Turns out, she was that one.

The University of New Hampshire junior had a cheek swab test through Giovanni’s Team, a group founded by UNH students to promote and host bone marrow drives on campus. Kabbara is the first match the team has had since it was launched four years ago.

Five months after Kabbara was tested, she received a telephone call from DKMS Americas, a national bone marrow donor center, telling her she was a possible match for a person suffering from leukemia. They asked if she would be willing to undergo testing and she agreed—despite her dread of needles.

"I hate needles. I’m the biggest drama queen about them," says Kabbara, a Nottingham resident who grew up in Boston. "But, of course, I was going to do it. How can you find out you might be able to save someone’s life and then say no?"

DKMS representatives told her they were testing a couple of other people as well.

It took multiple blood tests to determine Kabbara was the best match. From there the psychology major went to Dana Farber Cancer Institute for a three-hour physical. Two weeks later, on Dec. 17, she started the series of shots—two a day for four days in her stomach—needed to stimulate stem cell production in the bloodstream.

"The only side effects were nausea and a little bone pain," Kabbara says. "I could almost feel my bones working."

On the fifth day, Kabbara went back to Dana Farber for bone marrow collection. More blood tests revealed her blood count was high enough to do the donation without another round of shots.

There are two ways to donate bone marrow. Through a needle inserted into the hip or through peripheral blood stem cell donation, or PBSC, where the needle is inserted into a vein. Blood is filtered through a machine that collects the stem cells and then returned through a needle in the patient’s other arm.

Approximately 80 percent of the time, the donation is done by PBSC.
"The blood filtering way turned out to be the best way for my patient," Kabbara says. "It wasn’t that bad."

She had been prepared to make the donation during two four-hour sessions but on the first day, after they inserted the needles, Kabbara asked if she could complete the procedure it in one day.

"It took eight hours and five minutes," she says. "All of my blood was filtered eight times."

After the procedure, Kabbara felt exhausted. But the next day, she says, she was back to normal. On Jan. 16, she leaves for five months do a semester at sea with UNH’s study abroad program.

"People have such a misconception about bone marrow donations," Kabbara says. "If I could do it, anyone can."

Right now, the only thing Kabbara knows about the transplant recipient is that he is a 60-year-old man with acute lymphoblastic leukemia whose only chance of survival was a bone marrow transplant. She’ll get an update on his condition in six months.

"When they told me his age, they asked if I still wanted to do it. I guess the perception is that people are willing to go through it for a 6-year-old but maybe not for someone who’s 60. But I said yes because it’s still a life," Kabbara says.

"For the pay off it gives, it’s the easiest thing in the world. If the patient needed me to, I could do it again. And I would."

A photo of Kabbara undergoing the blood stem cell collection can be downloaded at http://www.unh.edu/news/cj_nr/2010/jan/jr14bonemarrow.jpg.

Cutline: Amira Kabbara at the Dana Farber Cancer Institute in Boston where she went to donate bone marrow after learning she was a match for a man with leukemia.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state’s flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,200 graduate students.

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