

# Showing Up

Category: Stories

written by Sarah Bigham | June 10, 2016

## **Sarah Bigham**

Years ago, as I left my college dorm room, the posters caught my eye. Plastered everywhere, they announced a bone-marrow drive led by a fellow student in search of a match for his brother, diagnosed with cancer.

A confirmed needlephobe, I'd recently fled a Red Cross blood drive at the mere thought of the tourniquet. Registering as a bone-marrow donor seemed like a terrible idea—but the sibling connection grabbed me and wouldn't let go. The eldest of four, I pictured my sisters and brother at home, two states away. If any of them had developed this terrible illness, I knew that I, too, would implore my classmates to be tested. So, with several friends, I made the trek across campus to register and have my blood drawn.

*I hope someone here is a match,* I thought, looking around at the crowd.

I wasn't a match, but my sample went into a national registry.

Time passed, and then, ten years later, I got a call: I was a match for a teenager with cancer.

Although I'd been told that I could decline at any time, I knew that if I changed my mind after the recipient had undergone the necessary transplant preparation, he would most likely die. From the very first phone call, I knew that I'd go through with it.

I've worried endlessly about other important decisions, but I've never doubted that one. It's what I would want others to do if my loved ones were in need. I imagined the grief and anguish that patients and their families must feel, waiting for someone with the right tissue type to step forward. I was the match, not one of many, and I was in the position to potentially save someone's life. This was on me. Of course I said yes.

After several weeks of paperwork and preparations, my mother drove me to a hotel near the transplant center. We knew the next day's proceedings would be lengthy, starting with the registration and pre-op and going on to the surgery to aspirate marrow from my pelvic bones, and finally recovery.

Very early the next morning, I reported to the hospital, anxious but ready.

My first sight upon waking was my mother's face; she'd talked her way into the recovery room. She patted my hand and smiled. Lying there, I knew that my marrow was being flown to another medical facility, where I imagined another mother also keeping watch.

Soon after, my wife arrived, having just returned from a research trip to

Africa. She piloted me home and nursed me through a fog of pain, nausea and bruising.

I never met the marrow recipient, but we exchanged letters, carefully avoiding any identifying details, per the confidentiality protocols.

"This is a very special holiday season because of you! You made a miracle happen," my recipient wrote.

I don't know his ultimate fate, but hope that he went on to enjoy a happy, fulfilling life. Even if the transplant wasn't successful, I hope that he and his family found comfort in knowing that someone was willing to show up and help.

Although I'd discussed the donation freely beforehand, I avoided speaking about it afterwards. In truth, my surgery had been more complicated and invasive than anticipated: I have twenty-plus pinprick scars from the surgeon's attempts to bore needles into my very hard bones, and this led to chronic hip pain.

The most painful part of the recovery, I'd been told, would be the removal of the large adhesive bandage on my backside. Nothing was further from the truth: Simply rolling over in bed brought on tears of agony. Too tired and achy to bounce back to my pre-donation activities, I felt rather like a failure.

"You must be a slow healer," sighed one nurse.

Humiliated, I stopped telling the donation story, even though I'm a college professor and essentially talk for a living.

Then, two years later, a student named Randy entered my classroom, wheeling an oxygen tank.

"I have a pacemaker, Prof. Don't worry if I pass out—the shocker will bring me back," he laughed, tapping his chest. Not particularly reassured, I fervently hoped there would be no passing out.

As Randy soon explained to the class, he had a terminal cardiac condition and was on a heart-transplant waiting list. Over the semester, we heard about the "shocker" a lot and even learned to laugh about it.

I found Randy's indomitable spirit inspiring. Despite his fragile health, he was absolutely determined to complete the class and earn his business degree. Day after day, he showed up and completed his assignments, no matter how exhausted he felt. Admiring his humor and sense of responsibility, I wondered how I could be most helpful to him and others like him.

*Perhaps it's time for me to start talking again about my experience, I thought, and share what I learned.* Besides, marrow-donation procedures had changed: Registering as a donor now involved only a painless cheek swab; and the marrow-aspiration technique had largely been replaced by peripheral blood stem-cell collection, a much less intrusive procedure. So when a marrow-donor

recruitment event took place nearby, I spoke briefly (if a bit quaveringly) to my students about my donation experience and encouraged them to attend the event, if that felt right.

Near the semester's end, Randy called me.

"Sorry, Prof, I won't be in class today," he shouted from what sounded like a wind tunnel.

"Is everything okay?"

"Well, I'm in the ambulance heading to the transplant center. I got the call. They have a heart for me."

"That's the best excuse anyone's ever given me," I told him. (It still is.)

Despite this interruption, and my offers of an extension, Randy completed the course on time, dictating his final paper to a relative who typed it and delivered it to my office. His new heart enabled him to spend several more precious years with his family and to complete the degree he'd worked so hard for. I hope that his heart donor's loved ones have found peace in knowing what a truly wonderful gift it was.

Now, in the midst of every semester, I stand before my students and share my story, including my recollections of Randy. I ask them to consider showing up for whatever initiatives they feel help to make the world a better place.

"You never know when you may be the person who's needed most," I say, "whether to donate blood or to lend a listening ear."

Their responses are diverse—and thrilling. Some examples:

"I just gave blood this morning, Dr. B!"..."I really love volunteering at the soup kitchen!"..."We spent spring break in North Carolina, building a house with Habitat for Humanity."

My current and former students tell me how they support food drives, train to work as teachers or nurses with underserved populations, register as organ donors, and much more. They remind me, daily, of our collective power for good in the world—of how many people are willing to show up and help.

I've also met several people who donated marrow under the older, drill-into-the-bones procedure and, like me, found it unimaginably harder than expected. They're my quiet, private support group. Yes, we strongly believe in organ and tissue donation, and yes, we would do it again. We're also glad that we probably won't have to—at least not that same way.

This past semester, after I'd once again shared my story and told the class about Randy, a student approached me.

"I'm Randy's niece," she said, smiling. "My mother typed Randy's final paper for your class."

Tears came to my eyes.

“I’ll be visiting his grave this afternoon,” she said quietly, “to tell him that he hasn’t been forgotten—that the people here still talk about him.”

Yet another member of a far-flung, often invisible community of helpers, making the important decision to show up.

**About the author:**

Sarah Bigham is an associate professor at Frederick Community College, where she teaches future educators and students from a variety of majors, including those who plan to go into healthcare. She lives in Maryland with her kind chemist wife, their three independent cats and an unwieldy herb garden. Her work has appeared in [Fourth & Sycamore](#), [Frederick Magazine](#), [Ink in Thirds](#), [Silver Birch Press](#), [skirt! Magazine](#), [Unbroken](#), [Whirlwind Magazine](#) and [The Write Place at the Write Time](#). “I began writing and painting last year as a way to distract myself from chronic illnesses and pain that appeared seemingly out of nowhere. These creative endeavors have been the silver lining of my medical journey.”

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