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I Donated Bone Marrow to Save a Life- and You Can, To

By Jasmine Danielle Deberry

After losing my best friend to sickle cell disease when I was 16, I signed up to become a bone marrow donor – and saved a life in her honor.

When I was eight years old, growing up in Charlotte, North Carolina, a girl named Jacquiea “Kiki” Brown moved to our community and joined our church. We became best friends very quickly. Kiki’s mom was a nurse and explained to our youth group that Kiki had sickle cell disease, a blood disorder that causes reduced blood and oxygen flow to the body.

At the time, I didn’t fully understand it. Over the years, Kiki would go to the hospital every so often and we’d all go visit her. I would always cry and ironically, she’d be the one comforting me, telling me everything will be alright.

Kiki’s blood disorder became progressively worse and we learned that her only chance to survive was a bone marrow transplant, the only known cure for sickle cell disease.

For many people suffering from blood-related illnesses, a bone marrow or peripheral blood stem cell transplant represents the best chance for survival. And according to DKMS, the world’s largest bone marrow donor center, while 30 percent of patients are able to find a matching donor in their families, 70 percent must rely on donations from strangers.

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A match is most likely to come from a donor who shares the recipient's ethnic background. Unfortunately, African Americans and other minority groups are severely underrepresented on donor registries. African Americans make up just 7 percent of all people who are registered, greatly reducing their odds of finding matches.

Kiki was not fortunate enough to find her perfect match. When we were both 16 years old, my best friend Kiki passed away.

I felt so helpless. When I turned 18, I did a cheek swab to join the DKMS donor registry in Kiki's honor at a drive that was held at my college. I went on with my life, enjoying college and playing basketball at Wingate University.

Two years later, I received a call that would forever change my life. I was a potential match for an 8-year-old girl with sickle cell disease.

I was shocked. Was this really happening? With Kiki's spirit in mind, I told myself, I'm doing this! If I can donate and save a life, then I'm doing it.

After completing the necessary paperwork, blood work, and a physical examination, my donation date was set. I did the peripheral blood stem cells donation on August 4, 2014 – a day that I will never forget. It was the day that I gave something of myself to save someone else's life. Someone like Kiki. Another daughter, sister, another young girl's best friend.

The whole process took about four hours. Blood was taken from my arm, filtered through a machine that extracted what was needed, and the rest was returned to my body. I was tired after the procedure and went back to my hotel to sleep for the rest of the day, but soon after I was back to my normal self.

I was hesitant to tell people about my donation because I didn't want all the attention. But when my basketball coach – whose best friend happened to be a stem cell recipient – told me that my story could encourage others to donate, I became inspired to share my story.

DKMS provided me with updates about my patient and after a year had gone by, I was able to contact her. She was doing great and was so thrilled to speak with me. I found out that she lived less than 10 blocks from where my older sister lived in New York City. Needless to say, we connected immediately.

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Last October, I had the opportunity to finally meet the beautiful Rosemarie for the first time. She was 10 years old without any signs of sickle cell in her system. Her family thanked me over and over again for saving their daughter's life, but the funny thing is that she's the one who changed mine.

Today, Rosemarie is the strongest kid I know. Seeing her healthy brings me so much joy. I love hearing every story she has to tell and look forward to seeing her reach big milestones, like graduating high school and going off to college—milestones that Kiki was never able to reach.

If you're considering becoming a bone marrow donor, I'm here to tell you that you can do it. Don't be afraid or worry about what might happen. Instead, consider the life that you could potentially save.

My faith led me through the process and it was truly a pleasure and a blessing to help Rosemarie. She changed my life. I now know for sure that helping others is what gives us purpose.

Anyone can register as a potential donor through a simple cheek swab, a process that takes less than 60 seconds (you can visit [dkms.org](https://www.dkms.org) to learn more or receive a free swab kit). And despite common misconceptions, donating your stem cells is easy and painless—and it's the most rewarding thing I've ever done.

Ordinary people can do extraordinary things. I am proof of that, and I feel blessed by the gift I was able to offer a young girl and her family.

Every three minutes in the United States, someone is diagnosed with a blood cancer. You could be the person to give someone a second chance at life.

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