

TRIB LIVE

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Steelers mom tackles bone marrow drive for Aliquippa teen

By Ben Schmitt



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Charlotte Heyward-Holfield, mother of Steelers defensive end Cam Heyward, helps host a bone marrow registration drive for DiMantae Bronaugh, a 19-year-old Aliquippa High School football player who is battling acute lymphoblastic leukemia. The registration drive took place Wednesday, Nov. 2, 2016, at JW Halls Steak and Seafood Inn in Hopewell.

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High school football fans will be abuzz throughout Western Pennsylvania this weekend as the WPIAL playoffs kick off.

Friends and family members of an Aliquippa tailback who won't be on the field want to spread awareness of a different kind: the need for potential bone marrow donors, particularly in the minority population.

On Wednesday, Charlotte Heyward-Holifield, mother of Steelers defensive end Cam Heyward, helped host a bone marrow registration drive for DiMantae Bronaugh, a 19-year-old Aliquippa football player who is battling acute lymphoblastic leukemia. By Wednesday evening, 222 people had registered to be potential donors.

Bronaugh is at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC and needs a bone marrow transplant to stay alive.

Bronaugh, who rushed for 1,200 yards as a junior in 2014, learned of his diagnosis on the eve of his senior season and did not play for the Quips, who last season won the WPIAL Class AA championship but lost in the PIAA final.

He hoped to return to football this season as the cancer went into remission, but the leukemia returned this summer.

Heyward-Holifield said she recently read a story about Bronaugh, which prompted her to get in touch with DKMS, an international nonprofit dedicated to fighting blood diseases.

DKMS representatives joined Heyward-Holifield; Bronaugh's aunt, Anita Gordon; and others at JW Hall's Steak and Seafood Inn in Hopewell on Wednesday as they registered potential bone marrow donors.

"Just to see a young man go through this illness, not once but twice, really breaks my heart," Heyward-Holifield said, overcome by tears. "I just wanted to do anything I could to help him."

She said she had a friend who recovered from leukemia after a blood transfusion.

Gordon said her nephew had two potential matching donors who backed out for unknown reasons.

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“He’s in a lot of pain usually, but he’s in great spirits,” Gordon said. “There are other people out there in his same shoes, and there are not a lot of people to choose from. Anything like this that can bring awareness, I am all for it.”

Kimberly Duncan, a DKMS donor recruitment coordinator, traveled from Atlanta to assist in the drive. Within 30 minutes, 40 people had registered to be potential donors by having the inside of their cheeks swabbed for DNA sampling. They then would be placed on a national registry.

Duncan said minorities are largely underrepresented on the registry — only 7 percent of potential donors in the United States are black. Blood cancer is the third-leading cause of cancer deaths in the United States, according to DKMS.

“We really need to diversify the registry,” Duncan said. “Usually you are going to find a better, compatible match of someone that’s within that same race. Even if we didn’t find a match for DiMantae here, there are other drives going on.”

Donor stem cells are collected in two ways: Bone marrow is removed from the back of both hip bones in a minor surgical procedure, or a donor is hooked up to an IV after receiving a series of injections to help stem cells move from bone marrow into the blood. The second procedure is called leukapheresis.

Dr. Alison Sehgal, a UPMC hematologist and oncologist, said both donor procedures are easy and safe. Plus, they save lives.

“A bone marrow transplant is the only curative treatment for some types of leukemia, specifically relapsed acute leukemia,” she said.

About 66 percent of African Americans are likely to find a matching donor, according to the National Marrow Donor Program. That pales in comparison to 97 percent of Caucasians finding a likely match.

After practice Wednesday at the Steelers training complex, Heyward said he and his mother were moved by Bronaugh’s story. Heyward has a foundation called The Heyward House, which is dedicated to helping youths.

“Hard situation — he was an athlete, too, so I already feel close to him on that account,” Heyward said. “To know that there’s not too many matches out there, and the two he did

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have ended up going away, you just feel for a kid like that. So I think we just tried to be as much involved as possible.”

