

The Fresno Bee

July 6, 2016

Young leukemia patient leans on family, friends, love of baseball as he waits for a cure

By Joanna Kroeker

Marcus Cato, 20, battles leukemia with Fresno's help

His story moved even the Dodgers and Giants baseball clubs to rally around him

First bone marrow drive will be July 16

Marcus Cato, 20, was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia on May 10. Hospitalized for more than a month, he's received an incredible amount of support. From left, Ron Cato, Melissa Cato, Joey Cato and Marcus Cato. Marcus Cato was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia May 10. A bone marrow drive will be held July 16 in northwest Fresno so he and others needing transplants can find matches. DKMS is holding a blood drive July 16 at the Sebastian Corporation in northwest Fresno.

Meet Marcus Cato, a friendly, easygoing, polite and charismatic 20-year-old. He's a sports lover who had a baseball career at Clovis North High School, and he wants to study business at Fresno State.

But in early May, he was diagnosed with acute myeloid cancer. He hasn't left the hospital since May 10, and his mother, Melissa, hasn't left his side.

So friends, family and an NBA player have come to him in droves. Visitors have overwhelmed the Cato clan – his hospital in San Francisco has tried to limit the number of friends and family who visit Marcus Cato every day, his mother said.

They're drawn to his charm, enthusiasm and wit, qualities he hasn't let leukemia take from him.

Cato's story has moved even high-profile athletes to rally around him in any way they can. Quincy Pondexter, a Fresno native who plays basketball for the New Orleans Pelicans, visited Cato when he was still at Community Regional Medical Center in Fresno. A friend

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of the family who coached Pondexter at San Joaquin Memorial High School related Cato's story, and when the basketball player returned to Fresno, he made sure to stop by his hospital bed.

Cato's love of baseball runs even deeper. His career began with T-ball and ended with the Valley championship his senior year at Clovis North in 2013. When the Giants heard about Cato's illness and that he is a die-hard Los Angeles Dodgers fan, the San Francisco team sent a letter of encouragement and a Dodgers jersey many L.A. players signed.

"The overwhelming amount of support has meant everything to me," Cato said. "Every day since the day I was diagnosed I have received texts, emails, phone call and visits, and I feel very lucky to have so many people that love and care about me."

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Marcus Cato, 20

People have used the hashtag #TeamMarcus to share updates and spread the word of a GoFundMe page and a bone marrow drive scheduled for July 16 at the Sebastian Corporation in northwest Fresno. Patients who are biracial like Cato have less representation in the donor pool, so bone marrow drives increase the chances of attracting people of a similar racial identity.

Support alone can't cure Cato's disease, but it can – and does – motivate him to keep being himself and fighting for his health.

And Cato's doctors have noticed this attitude.

"Several doctors have said his upbeat and optimistic personality have played a role in his fight through this battle," his mother said.

A sudden sickness

Cato's illness sneaked up on him. It started with throat problems that persisted for two months. Then blisters and sores on his mouth formed, and he came down with both A and B types of the flu. After testing negative for mononucleosis and pneumonia, his blood tested positive for acute myeloid leukemia.

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“The diagnosis was incredibly sudden and life-changing,” Melissa Cato said. “It hit us like a ton of bricks.”

She has stayed with him since the moment he was diagnosed, on May 10, and through his transition from Community Regional to University of California, San Francisco, Medical Center one month later.

“It’s very scary, and it would be scary for him to be alone,” Melissa Cato said.

Marcus Cato is currently in remission, having undergone two strong chemotherapy treatments. Because of his age and his general health, doctors were able to give him stronger treatment doses.

“Marcus has shown a tremendous amount of courage and has been incredibly brave,” his mother said. “He is truly an amazing young man and has been an inspiration to others. We are very proud of him.”

A bone marrow drive for a cure

Unlike other forms of cancer, remission means less than 5 percent of his blood cells have leukemia.

But to be cured, Cato needs a bone marrow match. His younger brother is a half-match, but receiving a donation from a 10-year-old is less than ideal. Cato will return home for the bone marrow drive DKMS is hosting from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. July 16 at the Sebastian Corporation in northwest Fresno. DKMS is a nonprofit that seeks to find matching donors for patients with blood cancers.

DKMS donor recruiter Koren Karlovic has experience with registration drives of all sizes. She said that when a community rallies behind a patient like Fresno has around Cato, drives have great potential.

“When there is a patient involved and the call to action comes forward from community members about another community member, a loved one, a neighbor, we do see in those instances those types of donor drives really can go quite large. We can get quite a turnout,” Karlovic said. “It really touches the heart when it’s the kid down the street.”

80 percent

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The percentage of peripheral blood stem cell donations compared to direct bone marrow donations

And the kid down the street – in this case, Cato – may have a harder time finding a match because of his heritage.

Karlovic said the registry lacks a significant range of diversity.

“What makes us beautiful as Americans is quite challenging when we’re bone marrow matching,” she said. “The diversity is immense here, and we’re proud of that as Americans. But when it comes to cancer medicine and matching donors when they’re genetically diverse, the more difficult it becomes.”

According to the DKMS website, the best matches are people who share the same racial makeup. The lack of diversity in the donor pool poses a challenge to patients like Cato, who is African American and white.

People of Caucasian descent account for 67 percent of the pool; Hispanic or Latino, 10 percent; African American, 7 percent; Asian, 7 percent; mixed race, 4 percent; American Indian or Alaska Native, 1 percent; and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 0.2 percent.

Karlovic is familiar with the misconceptions surrounding bone marrow donations.

The biggest myth: Bone marrow donation are incredibly painful and can involve a spinal tap.

The fact: Doctors prefer peripheral blood stem cell donation – like a regular blood donation – over direct bone marrow donations because they can get a higher quantity of stem cells to help their patients. The procedure is like a normal blood donation, making up 80 percent of bone marrow donations.

Doctors use direct bone marrow donations when patients with weakened immune systems, like infants and older patients, need purer forms of marrow. During these procedures, donors are under general anesthesia while a needle extracts marrow directly from the hip bone. Doctors never perform spinal taps.

“Both procedures require a needle, both are in-and-out with no overnight stays,” Karlovic said. “It takes one day away from your life, and a couple days of general recovery.”

She said there may be light bruising around the extraction point.

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“You’re back to school, back to work, back to life within a couple days,” Karlovic said. “It’s not as invasive as it’s dramatized to be.”

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<http://www.fresnobee.com/news/local/article87850232.html#storylink=cpy>
