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Stem Cell Donor Gets Surprise Meeting With The Woman She Helped Saved



NEW YORK (CBSNewYork)– It was a tearful meeting in Lower Manhattan Thursday for two women who had never met, but who now share an unbreakable bond.

Whitney Jenkins rang a bell to celebrate her successful stem cell donation. The 22-year-old college student from Texas was honored Thursday by DKMS, a nonprofit dedicated to fighting blood cancer.

Jenkins then got the surprise of a lifetime two years after saving a stranger's life, CBS2's Brian Conybeare reported.

Stacey Rapalee, a 30-year-old mother of two from upstate Elmira, New York, was saved from acute myeloid leukemia by Whitney's stem cells.

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“I know I wouldn’t be here today if it wasn’t for her,” Rapalee said. “For her to be willing to do what she had to do to give me my life, a second chance at my life, is extremely grateful.”

At first, Jenkins was in disbelief.

“I was just hoping it wasn’t a mean practical joke. I’m like are you serious?!” she said. “You have this connection and just to be able to meet them, it’s awesome!”

The head of DKMS said anyone can register to be a donor through their website. Fourteen thousand Americans need bone marrow or stem cell transplants and more than half of them can’t find a match among the 28 million registered worldwide.

“You do a simple cheek swab,” DKMS Chief Executive Officer Carina Ortel said. “That person is somewhere out there and that is what we work for to register as many people as possible to find a matching donor for every single patient.”

Jenkins said the six-hour stem cell collection was painless.

“I feel like I did so little and she’s so grateful and I’m like, ‘You’re the rock star you went through all this,’” she said.

But for Rapalee, whose cancer is now in remission, it was truly a lifesaver.

“She’s got the biggest heart of anyone I know. She’s done amazing things and I know she’s gonna keep doing amazing things. I’m very proud of her,” she said.

Jenkins wants to keep giving the gift of life. She’s planning to hold donor registration drives on campus when she goes back to college in Dallas this fall.
