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'Swab a cheek, save a life'

Hub man's lymphoma battle highlights lack of minority donors



Stanley E. Graham Jr. readied for a chemotherapy treatment recently at the office of Dr. Joan Goldberg. (Josh Reynolds for The Boston Globe)

By [Brian R. Ballou](#)

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Diagnosed with lymphoma three years ago, former Boston police officer Stanley E. Graham Jr. has been trying to find a compatible bone marrow donor to save his life, but he faces roadblocks.

Graham's heritage includes African-American, French Canadian, and West Indian. While potential donors do not have to share the exact same backgrounds, they should be compatible enough so the patient's body does not reject the donated marrow. And among minorities, the list of potential donors is lagging, so much that some medical specialists say finding a suitable donor is like looking for a needle in a haystack.

"We have to keep believing that there is someone out there who can save my husband's life," said Lorraine Johnson-Graham. She has scoured national donor

lists and helped sign up more than 230 possible donors in the Boston area, but nothing yet.

“My fear now is, how much more can he tolerate?” she said. Graham’s cancer has gone into remission four times since he was diagnosed, kicked back by potent doses of chemotherapy, but it flared up again in June. Graham, 61, of Boston, is undergoing more chemotherapy treatments.

Tomorrow, Johnson-Graham will again try to find a compatible donor for her husband and also recruit people to be on a national list of potential donors.

From noon to 4 p.m, during the **5th Annual Spirit of Boston** celebration at **Yawkey Club of Roxbury**, Johnson-Graham will ask people to register with the National Marrow Donor Program, which lists about 8 million potential donors.

She plans to volunteer that day for the Swab a Cheek, Save a Life campaign, run by bone marrow recipient Evie Goldfine. The two women have worked together before, going to churches, schools, and other large gatherings to try to encourage people to become donors. The **Boys & Girls Club of Boston** is partnering with the campaign for a series of recruitment events later throughout the area aimed at increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of the bone marrow registry.

According to statistics from the National Marrow Donor Program, blacks constitute only 7 percent of its database, or about 600,000 registered donors. The percentage is the same for Asians, while Hispanics or Latinos make up 10 percent. By contrast, whites constitute 74 percent of the database, about 6 million potential donors.

Goldfine, who is Jewish, said she hopes to ignite a grass-roots recruiting campaign for minorities, the same type of campaign launched in the early '90s that greatly increased her chances years later of finding a donor.

“Before that campaign happened, if you were Jewish and needed a bone marrow transplant, it was like being told to just go home and get your things in order.”

In 2000, Goldfine was diagnosed with lymphoma, and five years later received a bone marrow transplant from a donor who signed up with the Gift of Life Registry.

Goldfine said she benefited from the efforts of Jay Feinberg, the executive director of the Gift of Life Bone Marrow Foundation.

In 1991, Feinberg was diagnosed with leukemia, and doctors told him that he had a less than 5 percent chance of finding a suitable match because at that time, few Jewish people registered as donors. Feinberg and his family and friends ran

a campaign that over four years led to the enrollment of more than 60,000 people of various backgrounds as potential donors.

“We’d like to duplicate that effort,” said Goldfine, who lives in Boston.

About 10,000 people are on a donor waiting list. Registering to become a donor is a simple process, Goldfine said. The potential donor, between the ages of 18 and 60, fills out a health history form and runs a swab along the inside of his or her cheek.

After a match is found, donating is generally done on an outpatient basis. In about three out of four cases, doctors request a “peripheral blood stem cell donation,” much like a routine blood donation.

In the other cases, where a patient’s doctor requests marrow, liquid marrow is extracted from the hip. The marrow usually grows back in four to six weeks.

Johnson-Graham said education is the key to getting more people to sign up, people who may be reluctant because they’ve heard falsely that the procedure is painful and the recovery long.

“The more we’re out there explaining what it means to be a donor, the more lives we can save,” she said.

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