One Big Family: Transplant Recipient Meets His Donor

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June 25, 2019 By Dana-Farber Cancer Institute

For most of his life, Jim Calhoun never paid attention to college football; his football fandom started and ended with the New York Giants. This year, however, he'll be closely following the team at Tulane University — in particular, the offensive lineman who saved his life.

In 2017, Calhoun, now 45, was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL) with a Philadelphia chromosome, an unfavorable prognostic marker. His diagnosis came while he was on vacation — Calhoun fainted and hit his head on the counter, and was taken to the hospital.

"I was scared, but I tried to remain positive," says Calhoun. "I told myself, 'I'm not giving up; I'm going to fight this.'"

Because of his type of cancer, Calhoun needed an allogeneic stem cell transplant, one that uses stem cells from a family member or unrelated matched donor. While his doctors at Dana-Farber/Brigham and Women's Cancer Center (DF/BWCC) searched for a donor, Calhoun began chemotherapy in Albany, New York, at a hospital close to his home.

He didn't know it then, but his match was only a few states away, wrapping up his junior season at Brown University. Three years before Calhoun's diagnosis, Christian Montano, now 23, joined the Be the Match Registry®, a marrow registry program operated by the National Marrow Donor Program®, as part of a team-sponsored event.

Calhoun and Montano were a perfect match: They matched on all 12 genes that are tested for transplant compatibility. Montano donated bone marrow after learning he was a match, and in 2018, Calhoun received his transplant under the care of Corey Cutler, MD, MPH, medical director of the Stem Cell Transplantation Program at Dana-Farber.

"I was able to give someone a second chance on life in exchange for being sore for a couple of days. That made it easy for me to say yes," explains Montano.

According to registry regulations, a donor and a recipient can only contact one another one year

after the procedure. As soon as a year had gone by, Montano and Calhoun had their first phone call.

“That first conversation lasted hours, and by the end I felt like I’d known him forever,” Calhoun recalls.

One phone call led to another, and soon the Montanos invited Calhoun and his wife to join them in their Connecticut home for what they called a “celebration of life” event. The party gave the two a chance to meet in person and allowed Montano to introduce Calhoun to his friends and family.

“He saved my life, and a thank-you just isn’t enough,” says Calhoun. “I gained a brother, and I feel like I have another family now.”

This year, Montano (now a graduate transfer student) will travel with his college football team, the Tulane University Green Waves, to New York, where they will take on the Army West Point Black Knights. Calhoun will attend the game, which is only a few hours from his home, and Tulane plans to host a short celebration for the pair before kickoff.

Following his transplant, Calhoun has worked to get back into shape, and has since returned to lifting weights and biking. The father of two adult children says he’s working hard to adjust to his “new normal” — including training the family’s two-year-old dog, Bailey.

“I feel great, and I don’t worry as much now,” says Calhoun. “I’m doing more of what I like to do, and that includes finding ways to give back and help others.”

This article was originally published on May 30, 2019, by Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. It is republished with permission.

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