

Sometimes, a gift brings new life

The Costello boys were so excited. Their beloved doctor had come to their house! Cool! First time! They let him in and ran to get mom.

Mom trembled. A house call? After her youngest son's blood test just a few hours earlier?

Gently the doctor told 10-year-old Chris that he was sick and had to go to the hospital. Gently, too, he told Chris' parents what that sickness was: leukemia.

"He had to have transfusions the next morning," recalls Kathy Costello, four years later.

After that first year of ups, downs, treatments and remission, Chris got worse. He needed a bone marrow transplant . . . or else. But, as happens in the majority of cases, none of his relatives' marrow matched his.

This plunged the Costellos, a family of four from Webster, into the National Marrow Donor Program. The program is a registry of 4.5 million people who have taken a blood test and volunteered to donate their marrow, should a stranger need it.

One of them matched Chris, and he underwent the transplant. This is a harrowing procedure wherein the patient is brought to the brink of death to kill off his cancer. Then he gets the donor's marrow and, if all goes well, it starts producing healthy,



Left: Chris Costello with his donor, Ed Suslovic

cancer-free blood. From that moment, it is literally the donor's blood coursing through the patient's system.

As close as this brings patient and donor, they are not allowed to contact each other until a year after the transplant. Chris' mom, Kathy, vividly remembers that call.

"We had this cool nurse from Chris' hospital who got very attached to him. So that morning at about 5, while Chris was at home, sleeping, she came over to our house and put little clues all over the yard," Kathy says. "One said, 'Look under the bush,' then, 'Under the flowers,' etc." At last, Chris came upon a little box. Inside was the donor's phone number and address. He lived in Maine.

"We called at 6:30 and woke him up and Chris said, 'Mr. Suslovic, my name is Chris and you donated your marrow to me.'" For her part, Kathy couldn't even say hi. She was too choked up.

Today Chris is 14, feeling pretty

good and playing the sports he loves. The Costellos and the Suslovics get together each year on the anniversary of the transplant — June 2. This year will be their fourth celebration.

And that's exactly the kind of celebration that started playing in my mind a few months ago when I learned that I, too, might be a match for a 17-year-old boy who needed a transplant.

A whirl of emotions followed: elation, fear and finally, keen anticipation. But now, it turns out, I'm not that perfect. As the registry informed me last week, "We have identified another donor who is even more closely matched to the patient than you are." Well goody for him. I cannot tell you how jealous this made me. For a few days, I actually hoped Mr. Perfect Donor would be found ineligible, so I'd be back in the running.

Then I came to my senses and rejoiced that the young man had found a match. Only 75 percent of Caucasian patients do, and even fewer minorities because of lower participation rates in those communities.

So now I'm praying that the 17-year-old ends up as lucky as Chris. Join the registry and you, too, may get the chance to spread that luck. Call the NMDP at toll-free at 1-800-654-1247 for more information. □

Lenore Skenazy, NY Daily News