

# GIFT OF LIFE

## ALASKA STATE TROOPER DONATES STEM CELLS TO HELP SAVE STRANGER'S LIFE

Story by Beth Ipsen

The potential to save a total stranger's life is a part of being an Alaska State Trooper, but Fairbanks-based Trooper Brian Haley made it part of his personal life as well. After registering to become a bone marrow donor more than three years ago, Haley got the call that he was a match for a total stranger suffering from a life-threatening illness. Following a series of more tests to make sure he was a suitable donor, Haley and his girlfriend, Mindy Quinn, flew to Chicago in September so he could selflessly donate his stem cells to save a person he only knows is by the patient's age, gender and illness.



**DONATING STEM CELLS** – Alaska State Trooper Brian Haley tries to keep still for three and a half hours while blood is taken from one arm, cycled through a machine and returned to him minus some stem cells, and a little bit of plasma and red blood cells.

Much like the bone donor registry, the 29-year-old trooper became involved in this effort when he met his now close friend, Patti Jezycki, who was running a [Team in Training](#) booth. Patti flagged him down during one of his regular runs. Patti, whose husband was battling leukemia, recruited him for the program that helps participants train for a marathon in exchange for involvement in raising money for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. Unlike most people involved in this effort, Haley's life had been relatively untouched by cancer. He had only known one person – a family friend – who had died of cancer when he was a teenager.

"Everybody who I was running with was somehow affected by cancer," he said. "I met some really great people and lifelong friends."

He was moved by hearing the stories from fellow runners about how they had loved ones die due to cancer.

After he ran his first marathon, he was asked to be a mentor for Team in Training and continued to run with the charity program. One of the program's city-wide runs was coupled with a bone donor drive by [Delete Blood Cancer DKMS](#), a worldwide non-profit bone marrow donor registry. He filled out a registration form and collected a DNA sample by swabbing the inside of his cheek. At the time he thought "I'll sign up for it and I can always change my mind later." Then he practically forgot about the registry.

That was until he got a call this spring telling him he was one of two potential donors. For him, it was exciting to know that he had a chance to save someone's life. It was short lived. Shortly after submitting additional blood work at a local clinic, Haley was informed the organization decided to go with the other donor. He doesn't know the reasons – he suspects the other person may live closer to one of the donation medical facilities. Since so much time had elapsed since he registered, he figured it would be years before he'd get another phone call from DKMS.

Then in July, he was told he was a potential match for another patient. About a month later, DKMS flew him to Chicago for more testing. It was such a short trip, less than 24 hours in the Windy City, and he spent most of the time at the airport. This last round of testing confirmed that he was a suitable donor and a good match.

Kelly Taylor, Donor Recruitment Coordinator with [Delete Blood Cancer DKMS America](http://DeleteBloodCancerDKMSAmerica.com), said only about 1 percent of registrants actually get a call saying they're a match. There are between 21 to 22 million people worldwide signed up with the bone marrow registry. For patients, only about 30 percent have a matching donor in the family. The rest turn to a registry. Unfortunately, Taylor said it's estimated that only about four in 10 patients get the life-saving bone marrow or stem cell donation in time.

"There just aren't enough people in the registry," Taylor said. "Even with almost 22 million registered, there are so many patients that go without finding a match."

That's why it's so important for more people to register, Haley said.

"It's quick, easy and simple," he said. "If everybody did it, think about all the people you could help just by giving a cheek swab."

Once the donation date got close, Haley started getting injections of a synthetic protein called filgrastim for four days to produce more stem cell production for the peripheral blood stem cell donation (PBSC) method of collecting cells via the bloodstream. This method is less evasive than the old way of donating bone marrow. The donor's blood is removed with a needle from one arm, passes through a machine that separates out the blood stem cells and returns the remaining blood back to the donor. About 75 percent of donors donate through PBSC and 25 percent through bone marrow collection, according to Taylor.

The pain from the increase of stem cells in his bones surprised Haley.

"It was similar to the aches and pains you get when you have the flu, just a lot worse." Haley said that areas that were affected the most were in his bigger pelvic and femur bones but he had pain all over including in his



**THE KIT** – After registering at the [www.deletebloodcancer.org](http://www.deletebloodcancer.org) website, DKMS mails the registrant a kit including two cotton tipped swabs used to collect DNA from the inside of the potential donor's cheeks. Once the DNA is collected, the swabs are mailed back to DKMS in self-addressed and prepaid reply envelope. It's that easy.

## HOW IT WORKS

The [www.deletebloodcancer.org](http://www.deletebloodcancer.org) website makes

registering to be donor surprisingly easy. Potential donors must be between the ages of 18 and 55, in general good health, weighs more than 110 pounds but not have a body mass index greater than 40, and not suffer from a list of medical conditions found [here](#). There is no cost to donate. DKMS and the patient's insurance cover the costs, including travel expenses.

Donors and patients are matched using human leukocyte antigen (HLA) typing. HLA are proteins found on all cells in your body that aid your immune system by identifying cells that do and don't belong in your body. A close match means that the patient's immune system will identify the donated cells as its own and allow them to make new healthy blood cells. If successful, the transplant replaces the patient's unhealthy blood stems cells with healthy ones from the donor. A patient undergoes high dosages of chemotherapy and possibly radiation therapy right before the transplant to destroy all the diseased cells in their body and immune system to prevent them from attacking the donated cells. This makes the commitment of the potential donor especially critical. If the donor backs out of the last minute, a new donor needs to be found quickly or the patient will die.

Once donated, the cells move through blood stream and settle into the bone marrow where they will begin to grow and product red blood cells, white blood cells and platelets.

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arms, legs ribs and collar bone. He also suffered pretty severe migraine headaches. Luckily for Haley most the pain was controlled by taking just a couple Tylenol.

But every step of the way, he didn't change his mind. He kept thinking about this person who was possibly someone's spouse, child or parent.

"What little pain I have to experience is so much less than what this cancer patient is going through," he said. "If I'm such a good match with a patient, why would I deprive that patient of it?"

To him, the ability to save someone's life far outweighs the muscle and bone aches, or the time taken off from work and 12 hours spent on a plane one way for a whirlwind trip out of state.

"If they called me again next week to donate, I'd jump on it in a heartbeat," he said.

The day he arrived in Chicago to complete his donation, Haley was visited by a home health nurse at his hotel room for another filgrastim injection. The next day it was off to the hospital where he received one more filgrastim injection, then laid in a hospital bed for three and a half hours – not moving while blood was taken from one arm, cycled through a machine and returned to him minus some stem cells, and a little bit of plasma and red blood cells. With a needle in each arm and tubes running across his body, it was hard to stay still. However, the pain he had experienced for about five days instantly subsided. Afterwards, he popped a couple of more Tylenol to be on the safe side and he and Quinn, who DKMK paid to accompany him on the trip, set out to explore Chicago.

"At least I got to see and play around in Chicago for a little bit. We got to eat some deep dish pizza and go to Oktoberfest," he said. They even caught a show featuring comedian Kevin James, the star of the sitcom "The King of Queens."

By the time they flew back to Alaska two days later, all the pain was gone.

He was told at the hospital that, if both the patient and donor wish, the organization could help reveal the identities to each other. Haley said he

would leave that up to the patient.

"If the patient wanted to say thank you, by all means. If they wanted to be more private about it, I understand," he said. "I don't need the thank you cards or gifts. That's not the reason why I did this."

Anyone interested in joining the world wide [DKMS donor program](http://www.deletebloodcancer.org) can learn more at [www.deletebloodcancer.org](http://www.deletebloodcancer.org)

People interested in information with [Team in Training](http://www.teamintraining.org) or to join a local team can get more information at [www.teamintraining.org](http://www.teamintraining.org). There is even a website for the [Alaska Team in Training](http://www.teamintraining.org/wa/alaska/) at [www.teamintraining.org/wa/alaska/](http://www.teamintraining.org/wa/alaska/)



**ON THE JOB** – Alaska State Trooper Brian Haley, a patrol trooper in Fairbanks, talks to dispatch on a traffic stop on the Steese Highway this summer.