

# Saving a Life by Transplanting Hope

Medical student Grace Knudsen was honored at the UM-North Carolina football game on Thursday for donating her bone marrow to save a life, a relatively simple act she says anyone can do.



Be The Match's Carlos Wesley and UM Athletic Director Blake James honor Miller School student Grace Knudsen, far right, and fellow bone marrow donor Kayla Castillo for donating their bone marrow to save a blood cancer patient's life

She doesn't know his name or where he lives, but somewhere in the world, Grace Knudsen has a blood brother, a twin really, who she's never met but whose life she saved.

A third-year student at the Miller School of Medicine, Knudsen

didn't need any of the medical training she's had so far to help the man who was dying of one of the more than 70 blood diseases that can be cured by a blood stem cell transplant. She needed only to register as a potential bone marrow donor, something she first heard about when her uncle died of leukemia when she was 10.

"I always wanted to join a bone marrow registry but the opportunity never came to me," Knudsen said. "I am a creature of convenience so I didn't seek it out."

For following through on her intention last spring and actually donating her bone marrow last fall, Knudsen was honored by [Be the Match](#) before the University of Miami Hurricanes defeated the University of North Carolina Tar Heels at Hard Rock Stadium Thursday evening. The nonprofit, which facilitated more than 6,000 transplants last year, also had a tent in the pregame Fan Zone and promoted its [registry](#) during the game in hopes of convincing more 'Canes, particularly blacks and Hispanics between the ages of 18 and 44, to follow Knudsen's example.

"Eight or nine of every 10 Caucasian patients find a match because there are a lot of Caucasian donors and matches are more likely in the same race," said Carlos Wesley, a community engagement representative for Be The Match. "But only two out of 10 African-Americans and three out of 10 Hispanics find a match because there are far fewer black and Hispanics donors. We specifically picked UM for this drive because of South Florida's diversity, and because Grace is so awesome. She wouldn't hesitate to do it again."

But truth be told, Knudsen finds the attention rather

embarrassing.

“People keep making a big hub bub about it but, who wouldn’t do this?” said the New York native who earned her undergraduate degree in biology and physics from Cornell University. “I’ll have done four years of undergraduate school, three years in a biomedical research lab, and four years of medical school to save lives when I could have done that in just three days.”

After years of meaning to, Knudsen joined the Be The Match registry when the nonprofit conducted a drive at the Miller School last March. Signing up, she said, was “super easy.” All she did was fill out an online form about her health and submit a sample of her DNA, which she took by swabbing her cheek with a long Q-Tip.

“You just take a drink of water to cleanse your mouth, and then swab,” she said. “That’s how they ‘type’ your HLAs—your human leukocyte antigens—which are proteins on the surface of cells that regulate our immune systems. The more your HLAs match a recipient’s HLAs, the greater the chances a blood stem cell transplant will work.”

Krishna Komanduri, M.D., director of the Adult Stem Cell Transplant Program at Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, and a volunteer member of the Be The Match Board of Directors said, “It’s gratifying that our own medical students are aware of the importance of Be The Match and its registry. It’s a life-saving program that matches altruistic volunteers with those who need a blood or marrow stem cell transplant and lack a family donor.”

At the time, Knudsen felt like she hit the jackpot.

“I certainly felt like I had won,” she recalled. “Only one of 430 people who join end up being a match and even fewer go through the process. I wanted to be a bone marrow donor. That’s why I joined Be The Match—in hopes of being able to help someone. So I felt very fortunate.”

Her resolve wavered only when she learned that her blood cells would not be extracted the most common way—with a machine that draws blood from one arm, extracts the cells it needs, and returns the remaining blood through the other arm. The non-surgical, out-patient procedure takes about six hours.

Instead, her liquid marrow would be withdrawn by two large needles inserted in her hip bones, a process that required her to check into a hospital and go under anesthesia for the first time in her life.

“I was terrified,” said Knudsen, who forced herself to donate blood in college to conquer her fear of needles. “I kept asking myself, ‘What have I done?’”

But her qualms quickly abated, as did the pain in her hips and the weakness she felt while her bone marrow replenished itself. Today, when she notices the two tiny “scars of honor” on her hips she feels the joy of knowing that, somewhere, she has a blood brother. Given her German and Norwegian ancestry, she assumes he is of similar decent. She doesn’t know much else, but she feels a close bond to him.

After all, they are, in a sense, twins.

“His whole circulatory system is mine—he has the same

platelets, the same red blood cells, the same white blood cells as me. Anything that comes out of bone marrow we share,” she said, noting she made one request when she wrote her recipient a blind email. “I told him, ‘Please take care of our blood and don’t get me in trouble.’”

To learn more about Be The Match or to register to be a donor, visit the [registry](#).