

NHSBT Board Meeting:

A Patient/Donor perspective: 9/11 firefighter's life saved thanks to crucial bone marrow transplant from Coventry University academic

Status – Official

1. Introduction

This story is about a blood donor, Steven Dawkins 57, who was identified as a perfect HLA matched donor for an American patient, NYC retired fireman, Sal Parisi 68.

Steven has been a blood donor since his 20's, who was also signed up to the British Bone Marrow Registry (BBMR), as a potential stem cell donor. Steven was called up by the BBMR team in 2019, after a global search by the US donor registry National Marrow Donor Program/Be the Match (NMDP), to identify a suitable matching donor for Sal. BBMR worked to arrange the consent, medical clearance, and bone marrow harvest of Steven's stem cells, which were then delivered by courier to Sal's hospital in the USA in coordination with NMDP. The life-saving cells were transfused into Sal following a period of patient conditioning. Following a period of recovery Sal and Steven were allowed to make contact, anonymously at first, then 2 years later in a full meeting.

2. The Story

A 9/11 firefighter who developed leukemia after he retired had his life saved by a bone marrow transplant from a Coventry University academic.

Sal Parisi, 68, was one of the courageous firefighters who bravely responded on the frontline as the US suffered tragic terror attacks – 343 of his Fire Department of New York (FDNY) colleagues were killed, with many more suffering in the aftermath of the event.

Following a 27-year career as a New York firefighter in Manhattan, Sal was diagnosed with leukemia nine years after his retirement, which he believes is linked to exposure to the devastation caused by the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre.

An international search for a compatible bone marrow donor identified Stephen Dawkins, Associate Head of School for Student Experience in Coventry University's School of Media and Performing Arts, as an almost perfect match.

Sal said: "You can't compare that day to anything else. Everything was pulverised, all you saw was cement, dust and steel. We were at the scene of the attacks until at least midnight that night. The biggest thing I can remember was how much my eyes were burning from the contaminated air, not thinking that 17 years later I would have cancer."

Sal's bone marrow transplant, thanks to Stephen's donation, was a success, granting the American hero a pivotal lifeline.

Sal added: “My grandchildren – six of them – were all born before I was even diagnosed, and thanks to the transplant I got to see them grow up. The oldest one is only eight now, but they were babies when I was diagnosed, and now I can play ball and get involved in sports with them all and enjoy their company, and that’s all thanks to Stephen Dawkins.”

Sal reached out to Stephen following the successful transplant, and the pair met in person for the first time earlier this month, sparking a friendship.

The FDNY held a ceremony to mark their first meeting in the flesh, with film crews, captains and family members of both Sal and Stephen in attendance in New York.

Stephen said: “I think that when you give blood, you’re aware that it could help save a life, so donating bone marrow just felt like an extension of that. It didn’t really hit home that giving my bone marrow would actually save someone’s life until I met Sal in person.

“I would urge anybody who can, to donate blood and donate bone marrow. Donating bone marrow is a relatively simple process, it was just two days of my life, but it was for the rest of somebody else’s life.

“It was amazing to meet Sal and his family and it really did feel as though we got on like old friends.”

This story highlights the work that the BBMR and NHS Cord Blood bank do to help save lives both in the UK and across the globe by matching up volunteer stem cell donors to patients whose only chance of life is a stem cell transplant. This work includes managing medicals, organising investigations as well as coordinating the collections and shipments. This is part of a longer supply chain involving colleagues in H&I, TAS, CMT, who help with the HLA matching and stem cell collections or bone marrow harvests. The importance of finding a donor cannot be underestimated and this is addressed in the CAGT strategy that the Board will see today.

The link to an NBC feature news story on this remarkable story is featured below:

<https://www.nbcnews.com/nightly-news/video/first-responder-receives-life-saving-gift-from-unlikely-donor-144212037559>

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With thanks to Steven Dawkins, Rachel Worner and Sal Parisi

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