

Meeting My Hero

Christine Pechera gave the gift of life to her brother. Then, when she needed it most, a stranger from the other side of the world returned the favor.

STORY Christine Pechera



In June 1987, I donated bone marrow to my brother Rex. In the last year of his life, we had late night conversations; some serious, some joking. One night I said, "Rex, if you die, I die too because part of me is inside you." And we both yelled "Weird!" Then Rex said somberly, "Christine, if I die, you're going to have to live for the both of us. Promise me you're going to live for the both of us." I promised. On July 13, 1990, my 16-year-old brother lost his battle to Hodgkin's lymphoma.

For the next two years of my life, I lived fearlessly. I moved out to California from New York to attend the University of Southern California. After college, strange things started happening to my body: skin rashes, fatigue, losing 15 pounds in a month (in my warped L.A. mind, I was like yes!). After a three-week flu, I went to the emergency room. A chest X-ray revealed a huge tumor and a doctor said, "You may have only one month to live." My parents flew out to take me home, but I refused. Instead, I took my parents on a vacation up the coast; bittersweet because we thought it might be our last weeks together.

At age 30, I was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. After six grueling months of chemotherapy, I was told, "Christine, your cancer is still spreading. You have less than a year to live unless you have a bone marrow transplant." I underwent an autologous transplant. Doctors filtered out my cancer-free stem cells, then gave me so much chemo it killed my marrow. On the brink of death, the doctors re-infused the healthy stem cells into my body.

Post-transplant, I pieced my life together. I produced a film, started dating again and met a great guy. Three years after my transplant, I decided to move back to New York with my boyfriend. In fall 2005, my routine scans uncovered something unusual. Another scan in November was worse and a biopsy in December revealed my worst nightmare. "Christine, your cancer is back. You need to have another transplant." I cried in bed for two days.

I returned to L.A. and began the impossible search for a donor. There is an infinite amount of marrow types. Marrow comes from DNA lines so if you are half Korean and half German, your donor likely needs to be half Korean and half German. The bone marrow registry is essential to finding a donor, however, there are not enough minorities registered. As a donor and a patient, I know how easy donating is; I also know how painful bone marrow donation sounds. But the two options available are simple and painless; either filtering out healthy stem cells through an IV (similar to a blood donation) or pulling a little bit of marrow from two tiny parts in the back. The body naturally replenishes the marrow. And that's it.

Phone calls and emails evolved into a website, articles in newspapers, interviews on the local TV news and eventually a story on ABC's *Nightline*. I ran donor drives in New York, Virginia, Seattle and Chicago while my hair was falling out. Some nights I wondered why I was working so hard. Shouldn't

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Previous page and here: Christine Pechera, left, and her bone marrow donor, Kent Wong. Photos courtesy of City of Hope.



I be spending time with my family? But I wanted to go down fighting and save a few lives while I could.

When I came home from my first day of chemotherapy, my boyfriend called to break up with me. I was devastated. He ended the heartbreaking call with, "I deserve a healthy girl." Our breakup brought my friends even closer together. Over email they asked, "Who's driving Christine to the doctor?" and started Café Pechera, where each night a friend brought a hot meal to me.

In late May 2006, we found a partial donor from Hong Kong. Out of 10 matching variables, we were compatible on seven and a half. Each half-point a donor doesn't match, the odds of survival are diminished. At the end of June, my doctor told me that I couldn't search anymore. I had to have the transplant now.

July 5, 2006. I was happy to have a fighting chance, but terrified. After the transplant, I stayed in the hospital for more than 145 consecutive days and didn't officially come home until January 2007. My first six months out, I couldn't eat salads, sushi or fruit because of potential bacteria. Malls, banks or the post office were off-limits because of the high volume of people. I was isolated. After sneaking out with friends one night, my doctor scolded me, "Are you crazy?" I cried, "I want to live!" Even during my recovery, I snuck out of the hospital to speak at a fundraiser, with a hospital mask over my mouth.

Fast forward to April 25, 2008. City of Hope flew out my donor from Hong Kong. His name is Kent Wong. City of Hope brought my family and I to a green room, then walked us out to the beautiful rose garden, a healing place for patients. Walking up to the stage, I saw my friends who had brought me meals; my family who stood by me; my doctor who was like a mother to me;

the woman who found my donor; nurses who took care of me; and marrow drive volunteers who worked just as hard as I did.

On stage, as cameras reeled and flashes popped, I thought, this is weird. Such a private, personal event — meeting my donor — and everyone was watching. When I met Kent, I gave him a huge hug and said, "You're the reason I'm alive. You're my hero." Through his translator he said, "I am happy you are alive." I had big red buttons made for everyone to wear with "hero" in Chinese. I pointed out to the audience, "See all those red buttons. They think you're a hero." Kent replied, "I am not a hero. I'm just a human being."

After the press conference, my donor and I were besieged with interviews. My Chinese-speaking friend pulled me aside, "You need to talk to your friends because Kent is not used to getting hugged so much." Afterwards, we took him, his wife and 8-year-old son to dinner in Hollywood, then Mann's Chinese Theater and the Walk of Fame. We became family. We now communicate by email, which are in halted English sentences like "Family and me happy to meet you. Hope you stay better."

My story is rare. Most marrow patients don't find their donor, often succumbing to their disease. My dream is that marrow donations will become as common as giving blood. People tell me, "Let it go, Christine." But the other day while at a doctor's appointment, a gurney went by with a young man on it. His mother cried, his dad was quiet; I knew the battle still goes on. I promised Rex I was going to live for the both of us. I had no idea that maybe I was going to live for all of us — survivors and victims — and share the stories that need to be told. ☘

— As told to Jennifer Chen