

# Fight for survival

## Student searches for life-saving donor

Jennifer Hudson  
The Pendulum

Julie Thomas is a bright and talented Elon student who had a wonderful future to look forward to. Now there's just one ugly cloud hanging over her.

A year ago on a Friday night Julie went dancing in a night club. On Saturday she and her mother went shopping all day and she felt great. By Monday morning Julie couldn't even get out of bed.

Julie Thomas has leukemia.

It began with a sore throat, dizziness and fatigue. Thomas and her mother, a registered nurse, thought she had strep throat. The reality of the situation turned out to be far worse.

Thomas underwent several chemotherapy treatments and has been virtually confined to her home. Since finding out that she has leukemia, Thomas has been admitted to the hospital three times. Each visit has lasted more than 50 days.

Before she entered the hospital the last time, Thomas' hair had grown two inches. Within four days of the chemotherapy treatment, however, her hair fell out again.

Thomas is presently in the hospital and has been for the past seven weeks.

Thomas says one of the most difficult things to get used to is being away from her friends and people her own age. She says she can't wait to get back to Elon. She had wanted to return this fall but her health didn't improve over the summer as she had hoped.

Since Thomas isn't able to return to Elon this year, she has tried to incorporate Elon right into her hospital room by setting up her microscope.

Thomas is a biology major and was a biology lab assistant before her medical withdrawal. Although she's usually too weak to use her microscope she still likes having it in her room.

Thomas needs a transplant to replace the bone marrow she lost during her treatments. Thomas is an only child and neither parent is suitable. There is not a match in the National Marrow Donor Program Registry (NMDPR).

On August 16, the American Red Cross in Charlotte screened potential donors at St. Andrews United Methodist Church, where Thomas is a member. No donor was found.

So the search continues. Thomas knows she's in desperate need of a donor and continues to keep her spirits up. She compares the search for a bone marrow match to playing bingo.

“If anyone has the chance to do this, it's the opportunity of a lifetime because you're giving them a great gift.”

Lee Piccirillo  
Student

“Every single person counts when looking for a bone marrow donor because a match is so hard to find. It's like playing bingo.”

Evidently other leukemia patients feel the same way. In a pamphlet put out by the National Marrow Donor program called *The Chance of a Lifetime*, Larry Lundeen, a leukemia patient who was matched with a donor summed it up as “I'm the one who won the lottery.”

Julie Thomas is not the only student at Elon who has had to deal with the frightening disease of leukemia.

Lee Piccirillo faced leukemia when she saw her older brother struggle through it. After blood screening Piccirillo found out that she was a suitable donor for her brother.

“I'm glad it was me and not my little brother because he was only ten at the time and it was the most painful thing I have ever done. I'd do it all over again because my older brother is still alive because of it today,” Piccirillo said.

Piccirillo's brother is now one hundred percent healthy and has begun his career in Boston, leading a normal life.

“He values life more and we're so much closer,” Piccirillo said.

After the bone marrow transplant, he had to remain in the hospital for six months and was confined to his home for another six months. Because his immune system had been destroyed through chemotherapy treatments, people who visited Piccirillo's brother had to wear a mask and gloves.

This is virtually the same ordeal Thomas will have to face after receiving her bone marrow. A small price to pay to live the rest of her life.

When asked what she would say to someone thinking of donating bone marrow, Piccirillo said, “If anyone has the chance to do this, it's the opportunity of a lifetime because you're giving them a great gift. It's a week of pain for the donor, but you're giving someone else the rest of

their life.”

Like Piccirillo's brother, Thomas needs this chance at life and will continue the battle.

Karen Gutsche, a friend of Thomas' describes her as “a fighter. She tries to keep her spirits up but it's not a situation where she can be happy all the time.”

The Elon College Fall Blood Drive will be held October 20 at the Elon College Community Church. There will be a separate area set up to screen for possible donor matches for Thomas and Harrison. Harrison taught one year of elementary physical education in Beaufort, North Carolina before finding out that he has leukemia.

According to the pamphlet, *The Chance of a Lifetime*, the NMDPR has been built through the efforts of several parents and family members.

Despite their persisting efforts, many of their loved ones never had the chance at life because a matched donor could not be found.

Please don't let Thomas or Harrison add to these heart-wrenching numbers. Participate in the blood screening on October 20. You have nothing to lose. They have a lifetime.

Help them win the lottery.

## Elon blood drive will offer bone marrow testing

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A combination blood drive and bone marrow drive will be held on October 20 at the Elon College Community Church. Bone marrow donors are needed for Julie Thomas and John Harrison, who both have leukemia.

Thomas is an Elon student on medical withdrawal. Harrison is a 1990 Elon graduate.

Participants in the bone marrow drive will have a small vial of blood drawn by local Red Cross approved medical

personnel. Roche Biomedical Labs will test the samples to determine the volunteer's Human Leukocyte Antigen (HLA) tissue type.

The type is then listed in the National Marrow Donor Program Registry (NMDPR). If there is a match, then the person has the option to be a donor.

According to an NMDPR pamphlet, *Overcoming Ignorance*, approximately 500,000 people are now listed in the national registry. Only 14 percent of those listed are minorities who have virtually no chance of finding a match.

The National Marrow Donor Program Registry has been responsible for finding a matched donor for more than 1,000 patients. Of the matches, 65 were for minorities.

Because a person's marrow is a particular HLA type, thousands of possible combinations exist. Bone marrow type is inherited the same way as skin color hair color, and eye color.

Since tissue types are genetically controlled, people usually find a match within their family. If this does not work then they must find a match within the barriers of their own race,

because tissue types do not cross ethnic borders.

Caucasians has a one in 18,000 chance of finding a match from the registry, but minorities have a lesser chance due to the low number of registered minority donors.

The initial blood screening test costs \$60. Donors pay half of the fee and the remaining \$30 is provided by the National Marrow Donor Program for Caucasians.

The full \$60 for the blood donation and screening is covered by the National Registry for African Americans, Hispanics,

Asian Americans and Native Americans.

Bone marrow donations can also cure Hodgkin's disease, aplastic anemia and myelodysplasia. Even breast cancer can be treated with bone marrow transplants.

Over 9,000 victims die each year from diseases that could be cured with bone marrow transplants. That is equivalent to 25 deaths a day.

The problem is a lack of donors. Could you afford to give up a week of your life to give someone else a lifetime?

The choice is yours.