

Perfect Strangers.

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This month is the 10-year anniversary of a Hail Mary pass to a perfect stranger. But the story starts a bit earlier, so bear with me for a page:

Let's start with 9/11.

9/11/2001

I'd spent the summer of 2001 working on database disaster recovery plans in #1 World Trade Center in Manhattan and was no longer on assignment there when the planes struck. But the first plane to hit the first building flew into a data center I knew. So I was remote and knowledgeable about their recovery plans - in great position to help get systems back up and running, which we did in collaboration with an army of awesome volunteers and dedicated engineers and coworkers who worked through their trauma to get amazing things done in a short time under intense and stressful conditions.

And as months passed I followed the news of those who were lost.



9/8/2003

Almost two years later, the last firefighter who died in the WTC towers was buried. The long delay was because his remains could not be recovered. But his family realized he'd signed up as a potential bone marrow donor, and while today you just do cheek swabs at home to join the registry, back then you submitted 3 vials of blood. So they tracked down the vials of his blood that were retained by the marrow bank for matching, and the city held a massive funeral. In the casket atop the fire engine for the drive to the church was just a vial of his blood and his uniform. His name was Michael Paul Ragusa.

And reading about this funeral, I thought about the data: he was a row in the marrow registry database. If he now turned up as a match, there would be no way for him to donate bone marrow or stem cells. I can't match his blood type, but I can take his place as a potential donor on that bone marrow donor registry.

And by this time I'd lost other people to cancer, and in a post-9/11 world I was more inclined to actively pursue those things I had previously thought were good ideas. To have more than intentions. (Faith without works is dead, says James.) So I called up the marrow registry, got the kit in the mail, did the blood draws and sent it in.

The New York Times

TWO YEARS LATER: CEREMONY

TWO YEARS LATER: CEREMONY; Vial of Blood Is Laid to Rest As Fire Dept. Salutes Its Last

By Paul von Zielbauer

Sept. 9, 2003



Under yesterday's clear late-summer sky, flanked by two thousand firefighters frozen in white-gloved salute, nine men in dress blue uniforms slowly pulled a wooden casket from a fire truck and carried the box containing what remained of their final lost comrade into St. Bernard Roman Catholic Church.

*For a photo of that funeral procession with the flag-draped casket on the fire truck, see:
<https://www.gettyimages.ca/detail/news-photo/the-casket-for-firefighter-michael-ragusa-arrives-at-the-news-photo/539737204>*

January 2010

Skip ahead 6 years. It was a really tough day at work. Then that night I got a call from the *National Marrow Donor Program*: the sample I'd given back in 2003 was a preliminary match for a patient in need of a donor. She's a few years younger than me, with a form of lymphoma, a blood cancer. Would I be interested in moving forward? Let's see if it's a match.

Back to the lab for confirmatory tests. More blood draws to verify current health and the match. Physical at the hospital. Donation rescheduled. Then hormone shots daily to boost my stem cell production to support the requested type of donation, a peripheral blood stem cell (PBSC) transplant in which blood is drawn from one arm, run through collection machines and returned to the other arm for 4 to 5 hours.

For a 45-second animation of the PBSC process, see <https://youtu.be/2bTCSsIVmKs>

We're a match. 10 out of 10.

Of the markers they check for patient/donor blood type matching, the recipient and I are a 10 for 10 match. For a stranger, that's a needle in a field of haystacks. A 10/10 reduces the ways in which her body's defenses will attack the donated cells. You get 4 to 6 markers from each of your parents so you're most likely to match a sibling. She had reached the point where she needed to reach out to strangers, and found a 10/10. Thank my parents, not me.

Is she a distant relative? The more alike our backgrounds are the more likely we are to match. But genetically, we're all related with a common ancestry (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mitochondrial_Eve for our most recent common ancestor). The things we often invent to divide us disappear when you get down to genetics. So she could be anywhere in the world - and we are related, because we all are.

Fun fact: From a blood chemistry perspective, I am a better match with her than I would be with either of my parents alone.

So here's what'll happen: She'll go to her hospital and get blasted with radiation to the point that she will have no blood stem cells of her own left. For her, this is past the point of no return in this plan. At the same time I'll be doing my donation. Then she'll receive my donation, and from that point forward every blood cell she'll have will come from those received stem cells. So you see the extreme risk the patients take - and this is the best choice she has. There's literally nothing I can do to improve the chances of success. I just need to be there. I avoid driving for the last couple of days.

NMDP hooked me up with a mentor who had gone through a PBSC donation and had the same shots I got ahead of time. I asked her what the side effects were. She said it felt like her worst period ever.

And I reached out to a contact who had sat in the same exact chair I would be in - for her own transplant, one that was done with her own stem cells (an autologous transplant). She answered all my questions about the place and the process. So there I was, being supported by grace-filled cancer patients.

June 2010. Day Zero. (as these days are called for the recipients)

I spent the day squeezing a ball every 15 seconds for about 5 hours while a needle vibrated in my arm. Seven million stem cells, plus plasma and platelets, were drawn that day; they headed out the door with a nurse who was to personally shepherd them all the way to the recipient. Nothing I could do would make it more likely to succeed.

But, best gift I ever sent. It was her turn now.

There was an external and an internal outcome from this: At work, my manager submitted this story for the company newsletter. I said we should run a bone marrow donor registry drive on site. The person I spoke to asked why I thought people would sign up for such a thing. They will, I said; they always intended to, we're making it convenient.

And we ended up doing three drives, and over 75 people signed up, and at least one of those people was contacted as a potential match within her first year of being in the registry.



And in the room on the day of my donation, the lasting image we have is of the collection bag. After they drew off the first set of plasma and platelets they collected the rest into a single collection, multiple types of cells all in the same bag (*using what looked like a paint strip to judge the mixture, see photo*), from deep red stem cells to light, yellowish plasma, for hours. And the redder, darker cells are heavier and they settle to the bottom of the bag. The lighter cells drift to the top, and as hours ticked by we saw this spectrum of colors naturally striped across the bag from bottom to top, dark red on the bottom giving way to clear at the top, the product of density plus time giving us something we'd never seen: the blood components slowly separated into bands like a rainbow, dark red stripes sliding into plasma yellows. Never thought about that as a rainbow before.

That rainbow's been inside you your whole life, and you didn't put it there.
And it's inside everybody else you see, too.

June 2020

Happy Day Zero + 10 years (hopefully) to somebody's daughter/sister/aunt/mom.

- Kevin Loney, June 2020

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