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STONY BROOK MEDICAL CENTER PHOTO

Longwood sophomore Alex Mele, an avid baseball player, was supported by members of the Stony Brook baseball team Friday at a press conference to help raise awareness for his need for a bone marrow donor.

Mele seeks help in fight with AML

By Monday morning the camera lights had dimmed, the baseball practices were over and the laughs from comedy night had subsided.

As Alex Mele arrived at Stony Brook Medical Center around 7:30 a.m., the only thing left was a harsh reality.

Alex, a Longwood High School sophomore battling acute myelogenous leukemia (AML), had spent the previous nine days out of the hospital, an eternity-like reprieve before beginning another round of treatment. He checked back in Monday to begin round four of chemotherapy, another grueling procedure that would sap out all his energy.

In a continued show of support for Alex, the community helped him experience a whirlwind weekend before resuming the grind. It began with a press conference Friday at the hospital in front of several television news cameras. By Saturday morning he was on the field at Stony Brook University practicing with the Division I baseball team and by night he was enjoying a comedy benefit in his honor at the Middle Island firehouse. And then there was Bruno Gervais, defenseman for the New York Islanders, inscribing Alex's name on his stick before the team's game against the Ottawa Senators that same night.

"He had so much fun [this weekend]," said Lou Mele, Alex's father. "It was like being a little kid all over again."

About a dozen members of the Stony Brook baseball team showed up at the hospital Friday to help raise awareness for Alex and his need for a bone marrow transplant. While the doctors maintain Alex is doing well, the only step following the chemotherapy for him is a bone marrow transplant, which had originally been lined up. But for unknown reasons, the donor backed out and now the search is on to find another matching donor.

"It just didn't happen," Lou said.

The odds of finding an exact donor are extremely slim and the best chances come from a sibling. Unfortunately for Alex, none of his four siblings matched, so the search continues.

Lou's oldest son, who is also named Lou, is a volunteer with Glen Cove Fire Department and helped set up a bone marrow donor registration April 7 at the Knights of Columbus in Glen Cove in conjunction with the Long Island Blood Services and the National Marrow Donor Program. Any healthy people between the ages of 18 and 60 are encouraged to register for the bone marrow donor program, which is currently 7 million strong nationwide.

Dr. Richard Fine, the dean of the Stony Brook University School of Medicine, said the chances of someone being an exact match for Alex are really unknown. It could be one in a million.

"The only way in which we're going to find a donor is if we have a lot of people come forth and say I'm willing to donate my bone marrow," he said.

B.L. Frazer of the National Marrow Donor Program spoke of the rising need for potential donors, if not for Alex, for the one other person out there for whom you may be the only match.

"These are individuals who need your help," he said. "The only way we're going to help these individuals is to provide a life-saving donor."

The registration is a seamless process that takes barely 10 minutes. All one must do is fill out a form with contact information and medical history. Four Q-tips are provided and the individual takes a swab from inside his mouth, puts the Q-tips back in an envelope and that's it.

Registering is no guarantee of immediately becoming a match. Frazer noted he's been registered for 16 years and has yet to be called.

"It's difficult, but if you are called, you're probably the one person in the world that can save that patient," he said.

If called upon there are a few scenarios that could follow. The potential donor is brought in for a blood test to confirm the match. Depending on the patient, there could be one of two main procedures — a bone marrow harvest or peripheral stem cell collection — that the donor would have to undergo. Neither require incisions or cuts and the donor is normally fine the next day.

The Stony Brook baseball players and several other people gathered at the press conference did their part by registering Friday. Frazer collected the registrations of more than a dozen potential donors.

Alex understands most people won't be able to help him. But he knows there are many more kids walking in the same shoes.

"I don't want to see any other kid go through this," he said. "It's hard. I'm going through it and it's like my life is at a pause right now. I can't be playing baseball. I can't do anything."

With your help, that could change.

EXTRA POINT



JOE WERKMEISTER

He is the sports editor of The North Shore Sun. He can be reached at joew@northshoresun.com or 744-0404, ext. 19.