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Twin angels: Ionia woman meets her genetic match – and bone marrow donor

Kelly Arens' story defies all kinds of odds. She had cancer. Twice. The second time, she needed a bone marrow transplant to save her life, and a genetically identical donor for her was found: a man from Griesswald, a small town in Germany on the Baltic Sea. Then, through a lucky accident within the maze of HIPAA laws, Arens and her donor, Michael Lahmann, found one another. In July, he came to Ionia, and they met for the first time.

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Arens, who was born and raised in Ionia, had a picture-perfect life. She loved her job as a teacher at St. Patrick's School in Portland, where she taught for 13 years. She had a loving husband Todd and three gorgeous children, Sydney, now 15, and twin sons Tanner and Trevor, now 9.

In 2007, she was diagnosed with bone cancer.

"After surgeries and chemotherapies, I was declared cancer-free," Arens said.

Six months later, she learned she had acute myeloid leukemia (AML), a cancer that begins inside the bone marrow. The chemotherapy that helped cure her bone cancer can cause AML – but the doctors told her there was a less than 1 percent chance of this happening, Arens said.

"It's one of the worse types of leukemia, and I needed a bone marrow transplant," she said.

Arens' friends and family began organizing marrow drives, and more than 1,000 people in Ionia and Portland signed up to become donors.

"I feel a lot of pride. Because of me, some other life may be saved," she said. "It's a pay-it-forward type of thing."

In Germany, Michael Lahmann had been on the international bone marrow donor list since being tested 11 years before Arens got her diagnosis. Lahmann's brother-in-law had the same type of leukemia as Arens had, and everyone in his family had been tested to find a match for him, Arens said.

"Michael wasn't a match, but he still wanted to become a donor," she said. "He said he had completely forgotten he was on the donor list until Oct. 31, 2008, when he found out that he was a match for me."

Arens said, ideally, her transplant team was looking for a woman similar to her in both background and ethnicity. Three donors were found that matched nine of 10 strands of DNA. Lahmann matched all 10.

"My father is a walking encyclopedia of genealogy. He knew my mother's background, and German was at the top of the list. Both sides of the family has a lot of German," she said. "When they did find my donor, I said, 'He must be from Germany,' and they said, 'We can't tell you that.'"

Lahmann began undergoing weeks of testing to be sure he was healthy enough to be a donor, and receiving medication to increase the production of his marrow. A couple of days before the procedure, Lahmann said he felt a little sick, with flu-like symptoms such as body aches.

"It was peanuts compared with the results," he said.

Lahmann's daughter, Miki Krass, who was 18 at the time, had driven her father to the hospital in Berlin, where the marrow would be taken. She saw paperwork with Arens' last name on it, which is "a big no-no," Arens said. "It's supposed to be a number.

"She asked him if Arens is a German name, and told Michael, 'I think the lady you gave your marrow to has that last name,'" Arens said, adding that she had been had been an inpatient at UM for 90 days by this point.

Lahmann and Krass typed into Google: Arens leukemia U.S., and found her Care page, a web page that keeps families and friends notified of a patient's condition.

At 6 a.m. Nov. 19, 2008, the morning of her transplant, read a note from Lahmann on her Care page.

"He wrote 'Hello, I am your bone marrow donor and your bone marrow is on a plane headed for the U.S.'" Arens recalled. "I started bawling."

Arens said her husband called the woman who organizes the transplants, and she came running.

"She said, 'I don't know how this happened, but he is your donor,'" said Arens. "A lot of people were concerned."

The marrow, after it is removed from the donor, has to be transplanted within 24 hours.

"The same day, it was delivered to me at UM, just like in the movies," Arens said, "A knock, and the courier is standing there with the cooler."

When she first heard from Lahmann, Arens said, she was overwhelmed.

"I was fighting for my life. I had gone through chemo for bone cancer, but it was nothing like leukemia treatment. It was horrific," she said. "It took a while, but then I was so excited to be able to know who my donor was. There are others who never know."

Arens wrote Lahmann back, thanked him and said she hoped to have contact with him in the future. Since then, they have been in regular communication, exchanging information in e-mails and on Facebook, learning about each other and their families.



PHOTO / KAREN BOTA

Miki Krass (left) and Michael Lahmann tour the Ionia Free Fair during their visit to Ionia to meet Kelly and Todd Arens and their children Trevor, Sydney and Tanner. Kelly Arens is alive because Lahmann donated his bone marrow to her. Lahmann and Kelly Arens are genetic twins.

“I found out he’s a lot like me,” Arens said.

Literally. Arens’ saliva still has her own DNA, but the rest of her body now shares Lahmann’s. Not only do they have identical DNA markers, she now has his blood type, O-positive. She used to be A-positive.

The Arens family finally met Lahmann and Krass in-person at the Gerald Ford Airport in Grand Rapids July 18. Their five-day stay included a trip to Frankenmuth, a day at the Ionia Free Fair, and a celebration party at Bertha Brock Park for 300.

Their meeting was “the most awesome, wonderful experience,” Arens said.

“We were a little unsure, and the whole family had a little anxiety, but once we met, it’s like they’ve been part of us for years. They are part of us,” she added. “We have a bond with the two of them. There are lots of goose-bumps again and again.”

“It’s hard to find the words for what I felt in that moment at the airport,” Lahmann said. “I was very excited by that meeting. When you know you have a genetic twin, and she is still alive because of me, it’s a feeling you can’t explain. I was deeply impressed and deeply touched to hold her in my arms.”

“When I say he is my angel or lifesaver, he tells me I saved his life. He was at a low point in his life, and that call meant he had to live,” she said. “He calls me his angel.”

Arens said with a bone marrow graft, there is a high risk of some form of rejection, from a skin rash to total organ failure.

“I was very fortunate that I only had minor issues,” she said. “I am almost ready to be off all anti-rejection meds. (The doctors) feel I am 100 percent healthy, and they want to see if my body can do well without immunosuppressants.”

Today, Arens is a stay-at-home mom and an advocate for others facing cancer. She would love to return to the classroom, but her doctors advise against it. She will always have lowered resistance to diseases. Still, she hopes to do some tutoring. She also volunteers with the National Bone Marrow Donor Institute.

“I have phone contact with people to talk about my experience,” she said. “I just want to give hope to other people that they can beat (cancer) and be done. If I can help anyone, that is my goal.”

The children of both families have been changed by their experience as well. Krass, who is herself a registered donor, is studying to be a pediatric nurse. Sydney Arens, who worked at the donor drives for her mother, gave participants instructions on how to swab correctly. She wants to study pediatric oncology. Her younger brother, Trevor, wants to be a research scientist.

“The kids learned a lot,” Arens said. “They are advocates for kids – they went to a camp for kids who lost a parent to cancer and help other children that are new to it.”

Arens and Lahmann plan to continue to stay in touch through e-mail and Facebook.

“I know she’s doing fine. That’s the main thing,” Lahmann said.

“I’d do it again – no question. It’s almost the best thing I ever did in my life – after my daughter.”

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National Marrow Donor Program

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