



Couple fly husband's bone marrow donor from Germany

Elaine Schmidt | Dec 20, 2023
Success Stories Patient Care

Longtime spouses Wendell Liljedahl and Elizabeth Scarbrough were so eager to meet the man who saved Liljedahl's life, they flew Jannik Raestrup and his family from Europe to California

How far would you go to thank someone who saved your life?

For Wendell Liljedahl and Elizabeth Scarbrough, the sky was the limit. The Ventura couple cashed in their frequent flyer miles to bring Jannik Raestrup, his wife and toddler from Germany to stay with them for three weeks.



Why? Raestrup's bone-marrow donation had saved Liljedahl's life six years earlier.

A rare myelodysplastic syndrome diagnosis

In 2017, Liljedahl was diagnosed by hematologist-oncologist [Ahmed Aribi, M.D.](#), at [City of Hope®](#) with [myelodysplastic syndrome](#), a rare blood disorder that prevents the bone marrow from producing red blood cells. Left untreated, it can eventually lead to [leukemia](#) and death.

Only [chemotherapy](#) and a [bone marrow transplant](#) to destroy Liljedahl's failing immune system and replace it with a healthy new one could save his life.

Forced to undergo a blood transfusion every other day, the once athletic Liljedahl, then 66, quickly grew weak and struggled to climb the steps in his home.

"I can't describe what a shock it was," recalled his wife, Scarbrough, a former biotech executive. "Wendell's skin and lips turned gray. He began deteriorating in front of my eyes." She immediately began searching for the best care for her husband.

"Elizabeth discovered that City of Hope's program was among the best in the country, had been doing it longer than anyone else and was right here in Southern California," said Liljedahl, a retired investment advisor. "We met with Dr. Aribi and he agreed to take my case."

"Wendell and Elizabeth's relationship was so strong," observed Aribi, assistant professor in the Division of Leukemia, [Department of Hematology & Hematopoietic Cell Transplantation](#). "Their determination and positive attitudes were as important to his survival as the medical treatment we provided. It was an honor and a joy to be his physician."



Wendell Liljedahl and Elizabeth Scarbrough recently celebrated their 30th wedding anniversary.

Matching with a bone marrow donor in Germany

In December 2017, Scarbrough received a call in her car from Aribi. The worldwide registry had located a donor who was the perfect match—a young man living in Germany.

"I immediately burst into tears," she recalled. "I raced home, breaking all the speed limits, to tell Wendell the good news."

'I just wanted to save a life. I was hopeful and happy to help.'

JANNIK RAESTRUP

Raestrup had already begun injecting medicine into his thigh to flush stem cells out of his bone marrow and into his bloodstream. Beyond a small headache and minor muscle aches for a couple days, he experienced little discomfort.

A few weeks later, he settled into "a comfy seat" to watch a movie as clinic staff harvested the stem cells from his blood. Advised to anticipate a six-hour visit, he raced through the pain-free procedure in less than two.

"I just wanted to save a life," Raestrup said. "I was hopeful and happy to help."

Meanwhile, Liljedahl checked into City of Hope for a grueling week of chemotherapy in the bone marrow unit. In January 2018, Raestrup's stem cells were flown overnight from Germany.

Ahmed Aribi, M.D.

Successful bone marrow transplantation

Raestrup's stem cells proved a perfect match. Following infusion, Liljedahl's new immune system gradually took over, with only a few minor setbacks.

The COVID lockdown prevented the families from discovering each other's identities. Scarbrough doggedly resubmitted the paperwork multiple times, determined to find the man who'd saved her husband's life. After four and half years, she received an email on her husband's birthday in August 2022.

Liljedahl teared up at the memory. "It was such a thrill when we got the email — to know there was a real person whom I could finally thank for saving my life."

The couples (and baby Antonia) meet for the first time at LAX.

During the pandemic, Raestrup had married Annika, and the couple had become proud parents to a daughter, Antonia, then 1.

The families arranged a Zoom meeting. When their faces flashed on screen, both men cried for 10 minutes, unable to speak.

"Within the first hour, we knew they were lovely people," Scarbrough recalled. "We share the same values system and felt an almost instant comfort level." On their second Zoom call, she and her husband invited the young family to stay with them in April.

When Raestrup cleared customs at the LAX airport with Annika at his side and Antonia sleeping soundly on her chest, the first thing they saw was Liljedahl and Scarbrough holding welcoming signs and waving excitedly.

"It was so gratifying to finally meet and hug them in person," said Liljedahl, choking back emotion. "Jannick didn't owe me anything. He was a 25-year-old kid who decided to give of himself to save another human being."

"Seeing Wendell healthy and happy was such a good feeling," said Raestrup. "I would do it all again."

New Family Ties

Living together came naturally for the new DNA-linked family.

"We ate dinner together every night, and Wendell and Elizabeth cared so much for Antonia," said Annika. "They showed us around Los Angeles and lent us their car."

The two families continue to talk to each other regularly and share details about their lives.

"We never thought that Jannik's donation could lead to such a lovely friendship with incredible people," said Annika. "We plan to come back to visit when Antonia is a bit older."

The life-changing experience left Scarbrough philosophical.

"Wendell's father fought in World War II when he was Jannik's age," she mused. "What would he have thought if he'd known a German man would one day save his son's life?"

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