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Careers



Germany Elaine Schmidt | Dec 20, 2023 **Success Stories Patient Care**

eager to meet the man who saved Lilijedahl's life, they flew Jannik Raestrup and his family from Europe to California

Longtime spouses Wendell Liljedahl and Elizabeth Scarbrough were so

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

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

For Wendell Liljedahl and Elizabeth Scarbrough, the sky was the limit. The Ventura couple cashed X

in their frequent flyer miles to bring Jannik Raestrup, his wife and toddler from Germany to stay

with them for three weeks.

A rare myelodysplastic syndrome diagnosiś

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."

help.'

pain-free procedure in less than two.

gradually took over, with only a few minor setbacks.

cried for 10 minutes, unable to speak.

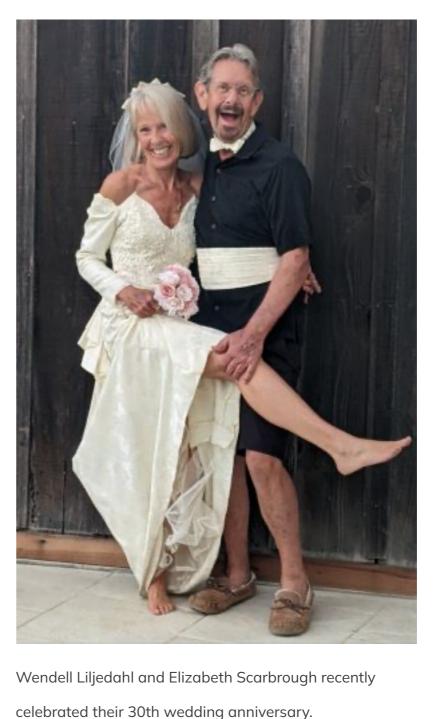
meet for

the first

time at

signs and waving excitedly.

LAX.



Ahmed

Aribi,

M.D.

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.

Matching with a bone marrow

"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

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

"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.

Successful bone marrow transplantation

Raestrup's stem cells proved a perfect match. Following infusion, Liljedahl's new immune system

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 During the pandemic, Raestrup had married Annika, and the couple had become proud couples parents to a daughter, Antonia, then 1. (and baby The families arranged a Zoom meeting. When their faces flashed on screen, both men Antonia)

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

"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

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

"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

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

New Family Ties

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."

"Wendell's father fought in World War II when he was Jannik's age," she mused. "What would he

The life-changing experience left Scarbrough philosophical.

have thought if he'd known a German man would one day save his son's life?"

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