

Ahepa Marrow tourney becoming mini-UN

Record number of teams poised to up donor registry

By Terry Poulos

Hundreds of volunteers are being mobilized to host the 2nd annual Ahepa Marrow Basketball Tournament, which runs March 10-14 in Chicago. It goes without saying that one of their primary goals is to have fun. But what really drives these “worker bees” is a motive that far eclipses such trivial pursuit as mere sport - that being to save the lives of people who are at times needlessly dying of aggressive forms of cancer.

Organizers, which include tourney chairman/founder Dr. John Venetos, are anticipating upwards of 80 teams participating - by far a record for any such tournament worldwide. Any persons of the Eastern Orthodox faith are eligible to participate. Approximately 30 different committee co-chairs and another 10 to 50 volunteers per each committee are involved, including many non-Greeks.

This effort is fast becoming a vehicle for a multitude of ethnicities to band together, pool resources, and raise awareness. Ethnic groups such as certain Asian populations face similar struggles as do Greeks in finding suitable, specific ethnic matches for bone marrow transplantation, and the resulting extraction of healthy, matching stem cells.

The main thrust of this gargantuan effort is to raise awareness for Greek Americans and beyond to - at their earliest convenience - get an easy, non-invasive mouth swab and enter the registry. Concerns about actual donation can be sorted out at such time a match is found. Even at that, the actual donation procedure itself is increasingly non-invasive. A new procedure, called Apheresis, is now being employed in two-thirds of all procedures, with the benefit of involving a relatively simple process of ‘blood-to-blood’ stem cell transfusion, versus bone extraction. Apheresis has the added benefit of engrafting from the donor stem cells, which then adhere to the recipient at a quicker and more efficient manner, not to mention it eliminates the need to inject a needle into the hip bone for extraction from the donor.

We Greeks have a special need for a specific match more so than other groups of peoples. Humans are dying needlessly because of misinformation and/or lack of awareness. In a nation of more than one million ethnic Greeks, a paltry 16,000 of us are currently registered as potential donors. This cannot continue! The odds of finding a suitable match are 25,000 to one, so one can clearly see we have our work cut out. Through the efforts of the Supreme Ahepa, along with thousands of others such as the Ahepa Marrow program and its members and volunteers, the registry has grown from 6,000 to 16,000 in the past three years alone.. The tournament was inspired largely by the tragic story of Illinois Hall of Fame high school coach Steve Pappas, who died of an insidious form of lymphoma.

To underscore the magnitude of the problem, in 2008 there were 9,000 searches performed from the Ahepa marrow registry. Approximately 3,000 transplants are performed each year across all ethnic groups worldwide. At any given time, 20,000 to 30,000 patients are seeking a transplant and only about 3,000 transplants occur annually. If a match can be found, most do extremely well.

Anyone under 60 years of age and in good health should be signed up for their respective community's registry, without exception! The registry loses members every year due to age-related and other forms of attrition, so this is an ongoing, never-ending battle to replenish with new samples. Registering alone does not obligate one to donation, but think about it this way: If you could save someone's life, and all it took - for brevity's sake - was little more than donating blood and no needle would be stuck in your bone, very few would refuse. Granted, not all procedures are able to employ the Apheresis method, but the overwhelming majority do. At such point a decision must be made, thorough due diligence would commence before any final decision need be made. The minimum requisite here is getting tested, and that entails a quick and painless mouth swab.

"There's no doubt in my mind that this (tournament) is going to continue to grow," said Dr. Venetos, Chairman of Medicine at Swedish Covenant Hospital in Chicago and a longtime friend and personal physician to Pappas. "It truly is a 'tournament that saves lives'. We're starting to see results where donors are being found from our donor pool. We had four successful marrow transplants in the last three years. Today, 27-year old Chicagoan Joanna Billionis beat Hodgkins Lymphoma and is alive and thriving today due to efforts at increasing registry numbers. On a sad note, last year we were searching for a young Philippine man named Leo. Unfortunately, he passed away the night before Christmas without finding a match. He had three daughters age one to five.

"We've decided that every year we'll highlight a particular individual, and their particular situation, to bring awareness to their condition," continued Dr. Venetos. "Although we try, we're not always successful. We're currently searching for a match for the individuals, including a 64-year old Greek man from Washington D.C. named George Alexandrou, who has acute leukemia. We're also trying to help a young Korean boy who is suffering with a severe genetic amino deficiency syndrome that requires a stem cell transplant. Presently there are no matches. We've used our expertise and ability to do drives and rally the troops not only to help Greeks, but to ask for assistance from others and help others. We conducted a drive at the Greek embassy and have the ability now for any Greek from the USA to go online to our website (www.AhepaMarrow.org), where they can get info and receive a simple test kit via the postal service. The cost is picked up by the Ahepa marrow program."

No excuses, people. Time to step up. "There but for the grace of God go I" has become a widespread adage. Get the swab, lest it be you or a loved one in need. Log on to AhepaMarrow.org and do the right thing.

TOURNEY QUICK FACTS: Games held March 10-14, 2010. Four different gymnasiums on the Northwest Side of Chicago, with Sunday championship games and the weekend 3-point contest at North Park University. Divisions of Men's Senior(45yo and older), Men's Gold bracket, Men's Silver bracket, Women's bracket, Boys High School bracket, Boys Fr. & So. bracket, and Boys Grade School bracket, and Bidy bracket. Teams from coast-to-coast, including Toronto, New Jersey, New York, and San Francisco, among others.

SPONSORS: Charles Schwab brokerage (3-point shootout), the Cubby Bear sports club (social event kickoff), Swedish Covenant Hospital (seeding event), Giordanos Pizza (seeding event), Chicago Bulls (silent auction), and division trophy sponsors the George Loukas family, John Venetos family, Devanco Foods, Monastero's Restorante, and the Greek American Restaurant Association. All 3-point contest proceeds to benefit young Yano (HelpYano.com), a five-year old suffering from neuro blastoma. The tourney will recognize two "Inspirational Memorial Honorees," Dr. Ted Koutas, whose hard work and dream led to the creation of the Greek American Nursing Home in Wheeling, Illinois, and the late Nick Kladis, a former NCAA All-American basketball player who became a philanthropist and supported Greek American basketball programs. The tourney will also recognize Phil Bouzeos, the current and longtime president of the 80-year old National Hellenic Invitational Basketball Tournament, the oldest such tourney in the nation, and George Sfondiles, former St. Constantine & Helen basketball coach who was instrumental in mentoring youth through sports. The committee is seeking sponsors for banners, items for the silent auction, and ads for the program book. Volunteers more than welcome.

FEB. 20 SOCIAL EVENT: Come to the Cubby Bear-Wrigley Field (corner of Addison & Clark) on Saturday, Feb. 20 to kick off the tourney and celebrate those who help save lives! Runs 8 pm to 1 am. No cover (\$5 suggested donation), amazing DJ, tasty appetizers.

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