

SPORTS & LEISURE

AHEPA tourney a 'call for arms' in cancer battle

Courts awareness and funds for urgent bone marrow testing

By TERRY POULOS

Hundreds and hundreds of volunteers, each sharing the common denominator of being Eastern Orthodox 'blood brothers', anxiously await the inaugural AHEPA Marrow Tournament, a cornucopia of basketball serving as a literal "call for arms." That is, human arms for oral buccal swab testing and inclusion in the international AHEPA Bone Marrow Registry as potential donors.

The tourney is being held March 12-15 in Chicago, with the motto "A tournament that saves lives". Never before have fun and games been so gravely serious. A loss here and somebody dies.

With this in mind, a special spotlight will be reserved for Leo, a married 35-year-old with three young daughters, and Peter, a young boy from Connecticut. Both individuals are in dire need of bone marrow matches. The hope is that through the tourney's testing a match will be found. Funds raised at the tournament will cover the incredible costs associated with testing eligible donors, a requisite to joining the registry.

Former basketball coach Steve Pappas, a key inspiration for the AHEPA tourney, is a prime example of how important these drives have become. The one-time St. Demetrios of Chicago youth coach and mentor moved on to the high school level and achieved such great success he was voted into the Illinois High School Association Hall of Fame in 2006. Two years prior to that ceremony, Pappas fell victim to an insidious and aggressive form of cancer for which only an extremely specific, ethnic bone marrow match could possibly cure. Such stem cell transplantation procedures have been lifesavers for a growing number of patients and the discipline has been a booming area of medicine the past few years. Nonetheless, awareness and potential donors remain scarce.

In 2008, approximately 35,000 American children and adults with life-threatening diseases could have benefited from a marrow, blood stem cell, or cord blood transplant. But with the lack of resources to compile suitable databases, about 70-percent of those patients were left with no other option other than to seek matches by reaching out individually. This time-consuming and arcane process makes locating a suitable match almost beyond statistical probability.

Latest studies indicate the odds of finding a suitable match are 20,000 to one. Unfortunately, in early 2006 AHEPA had little more than 6,500 names on their registry. Compounding the problem is those of Mediterranean origin, such as Greeks, have an even more difficult task locating suitable matches. Through the efforts of a multitude of volunteers, the AHEPA list today contains upwards of 15,000 names. Tragically, however, the additions arrived too late for Coach Pappas, who left this world far too early at a young 54 years of age.

Dr. John Venetos, a longtime friend of and player for Pappas, also served as his personal physician. He took Pappas' death hard, so much so that he made it his mission to increase awareness, raise vital funds for testing, and get as many Greeks, Cypriots, Armenians, Serbians, Assyrians, and all other Eastern Orthodox ethnics tested and listed on the registry at everyone's earliest possible convenience.

Through the efforts of the AHEPA marrow program and its leadership and highly dedicated volunteers, an additional 2,114 potential donors were added during the 3rd annual Ahepa two-week marrow campaign in May, 2008.

Having long participated as a player, coach, and committee member in the 79-year old National Hellenic Invitational Basketball Tournament (NHIBT March 26-29 in Oak Park, Illinois), the nation's oldest and most prestigious such tournament, Venetos hatched the idea to use sport to help save lives.

Teammates on his 1977 and 1978 high school championship teams have been the core group organizing this new tournament. In 2002, the 1977 team celebrated a 25-year reunion with both Steve Pappas and St. D's athletic director, the late Frank Nicholson. Venetos and his teammates are gratified they at minimum had the opportunity to acknowledge and thank both Pappas and Nicholson for their commitment to Greek Orthodox youth.

"Through testing efforts such as those we conducted at last year's NHIBT and other Greek venues, many now know Steve's story," explained Venetos. "But there will be other Steve Pappases who are currently and others who will eventually be dying of similar diseases. They desperately need our help. It could be any one of us or a relative. Therefore, we need to be proactive and continue to work hard to reach our goal of bringing our registry to over 20,000 active registrants.



Joanna Bilonis, 27, is alive today and cancer-free! only because she was able to locate an exact ethnic bone marrow match, in time, and suitable for transplantation. Hundreds of volunteers across the nation have been infused with a lightning bolt of energy and motivation thanks to Joanna's success story. The end game? Up the AHEPA donor registry to a recommended 25,000 names, minimum. Have you been tested and registered? It's simple (mouth swab), free, and widely available in March at the AHEPA Marrow Tournament and various other venues.

"It is with tremendous joy that these public awareness efforts recently manifested when a match was found for cancer patient Joanna Bilonis," beamed Venetos. "Eight months ago Joanna was dying of cancer and now we are thankful she is cancer free and will be at the tournament volunteering and demonstrating the importance of recruiting eligible donors. She continues to be—literally—living proof of this, and she's an inspiration to all of us."

Bilonis, now 27, is a vibrant, educated woman who previously had been administered two separate courses of chemotherapy or radiation treatment, yet her young life still hung in the balance until a suitable marrow match was located late last year. Her cancer is now in full remission and her story fuels the fire for the hoards of volunteers to march onward to witness even more miracles stemming from this honorable crusade.

"We're planning many more of these drives," said Alex Gountanis, a Chicago accountant and another friend and player on Pappas' teams. Gountanis has also been active with past marrow drives. "We want to get the registry up to 25,000 in the near future so we can help people in need of a transplant. Joanna is the first one that we've had and we want to build on that and try to help others. It's all about awareness."

In late February, we spoke with tournament officials to learn more about the first-ever tourney. More than 65 teams from across the continent will compete in divisions of men, women, boys high school, boys 15-and-under, and grammar school. Teams can still register up until March 8. There will also be a Charles Schwab sponsored 3-point

contest for all divisions including Senior Men (over 45 years old). Organizers of that are George Demos, Kirk Vidas, Christine Dimoulis, Vickie Kozonis, and Tony Chronis. The committee plans this as an annual event with proceeds going toward a person facing immediate financial needs. This year, that person is Niko Bezanis, a young man who's now a quadriplegic after an unfortunate accident. He's also facing a multitude of medical bills that were not covered by insurance. Gountanis is a longtime friend and former teammate of Niko's father Paul.

As for the actual teams, in addition to hundreds of players from the Chicago area and across the country, Venetos was especially gratified to learn a team from Sri Lanka will travel across the globe to participate. He envisions one day soon perhaps being able to make this an international tournament. Quite the task for a time-constrained physician.

"We've done it in such a way as to delegate specific duties and responsibilities to over thirty committees," said Venetos. "We hope this will allow everyone to take ownership, which is extremely important. It also allows our youth an opportunity to learn about AHEPA and begin to be involved in many worthy causes. With hard work and some luck, hopefully we can get this to 64 men's teams in the future.

"We've been fortunate to attract some key sponsors," said Venetos, "including Giordano's Pizza, GreekSoccer.com, the Hellenic American Restaurant Association, Cubby Bear sports club and George Loukas, the Chicago Bulls and assistant coach Bob Ociepa, Swedish Covenant Hospital, and Schwab. Antenna 1 satellite TV-Greece will cover portions so we can reach a global audience. We've been able to get so much support because - no question - the key people running and contributing to the tourney are guys that Steve touched. His memory is one of the main drivers in this."

Several other individuals will also be honored at the tourney, including the late George Pantazelos for his vast contributions to Ahepa 13th District. District Governor Lou Atsaves and athletic director Chris Atsaves, as well as all the surrounding Ahepa Chapters, have been very supportive and helpful.

"The great majority of court time and facilities have been donated free of charge," said Venetos. "Once again, ongoing relationships,

friendships, and the common denominator of basketball and saving lives have enabled us to reach out to these institutions for help and support. The gymnasiums are at North Park University, Northeastern Illinois University, Northside College Prep, Mather High School, and Fairview Junior High.

"The referees are working for vastly reduced pay," said Venetos. "Everybody is doing their part, from



The story of Steve Pappas, a legend in the social circles of St. Demetrios of Chicago youth basketball, stands in stark contrast to that of Joanna's. His aggressive cancer reached a highly advanced stage by the time a suitable donor match could be found, and he succumbed to this insidious disease in early 2006 at the age of 54. But not before his legions of disciples were imbued with the strength of his character, witnessing a man's unyielding resolve during a fierce, albeit futile battle to extend his life. Organizers of the AHEPA Marrow Tournament are pleading for the entire Greek community to get tested and registered. Someone's life - your own or a loved one's perhaps - might soon depend on all of us taking decisive action, now!

the scoreboard and clock operators all the way on down to cleanup. I hope we can grow it like a pyramid. With our system, I don't want to see any one person volunteering 8 hours during the tournament. I want 8 people working one hour each. We have much to accomplish.

"During the tournament, at almost every venue, we've found various ways to honor Steve Pappas,"

said Venetos. "And others, like (the late) Frank Nicholson, longtime St. D's youth coach, and (the late) Peter Economos, a man instrumental with the Diocese Junior Olympics, Dr. Monthe Kofos, the late longtime national athletic director of AHEPA, Dr. Peter Paulus, the first chairman of the AHEPA marrow registry, and Dr. John Revis, a highly respected Chicago-area physician who was enormously loved by his patients."

Through the years, many other Greek men have emerged to take strong leadership roles in the community, in and out of basketball. Once such is NHIBT president Phil Bouzeos.

"Mr. Bouzeos has kept alive community between Greek people with the longest running Greek basketball tournament in the world," said Venetos. "His involvement, spanning more than half-a-century, has taught us how vital it is to keep these associations going. The connections we achieved through the NHIBT have allowed us to keep these relationships alive and conduct these drives. What we're doing brings even more attention to Chicago as the central locale for Greek basketball. And as always we'll utilize our resources to support the NHIBT in hopes this becomes a win-win combination. In a similar vein, this whole marrow movement has resulted in many new AHEPA members, many of whom are not Greek. We're emboldened when we hear these things!"

Organizers are doing their best to make almost every facet of the AHEPA experience unique both in its function and charm. To more accurately and fairly formulate brackets, there will be a seeding event (sponsored by Giordano's) replete with computerized voting. Most teams will pre-qualify in actual games for Gold or Silver Division brackets. Each team is guaranteed a minimum four games. On Sunday, March 15th during championship games, the Chicago Bulls will sponsor a silent auction. With the officials, they'll honor the top two referees, with a committee of peers led by Ray Piagentini and George Demos choosing the top officials based on efficacy and sportsmanship. In addition to the standard MVP and All-Tournament team, there will be a "6th man" award to the best bench player, a hustle award, best defensive player, and best rebounder and playmaker awards. "These are important players for

any team who quite often don't get the recognition they deserve," Venetos points out, then adding "those who know basketball well, know it's not nearly always the player who puts up the most points who is most valuable to the team. This notion embodies Coach Pappas' very being, as he always emphasized the concept of TEAM FIRST."

"Some of Coach Pappas' other players," continued Venetos, "my teammates from those St. D's days, include guys like James Chiakulas, Steve Tzioumis, Tom Stavropoulos, and Alex (Gountanis). Accordingly, they've all taken on enormous tasks with the tournament. Like me, they know there's a journey to endeavors like this. You meet new people and establish lifelong friendships. In order to be successful, we need every single one of the hundreds of volunteers, and some. We look forward to the challenge as all our lives could one day depend on how we perform here. That's not something to back down from."

AHEPA MARROW TOURNAMENT

- * March 12-15, 2009 in Chicago
- * More volunteers still needed
- * Team enrollment deadline March 8
- * Info: www.AhepaMarrow.org or (773) 989-6262
- * Free admission to games
- * March 14 social at Cubby Bear-Wrigley Field Starts after 9 pm, Clark & Addison Streets
- * Come watch the games join registry!

30th DEMOS TOURNEY THIS WEEKEND

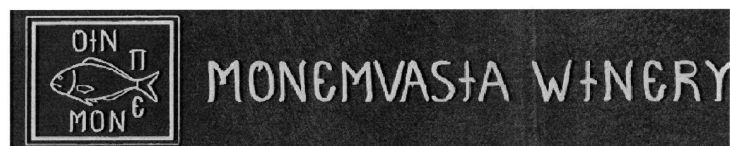
The 30th annual George Demos Men's Basketball Tournament, a Pan-Hellenic event, March 6-8, at Mozart Park and Sheridan Park in Chicago. About 16 to 20 will participate from the Greek, Serbian, Armenian, and Russian communities. Demos, a former NCAA Division I basketball referee, was a prep legend at Sullivan High School, where he averaged 39.1 points per game his senior year. He went on to star at the University of Illinois at Chicago before playing professionally for a year in Greece (AEK) and later played a year in the Continental Basketball League. Tournament championship games held Sunday afternoon at Mozart. Email GTD@wowway.com or phone (847) 738-2469.

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