

A Commitment to Life

By Stephen Rusiniak

From the book: **Chicken Soup for the Soul Volunteering & Giving Back**

It's not how much we give but how much love we put into giving. ~Mother Teresa

To be perfectly honest, I was proud of myself. The snow was falling and the roads had become treacherous. The schools were having early dismissal, but much to my surprise my appointment wasn't canceled. And so I went, feeling especially heroic. After all, as far as I could see, I was risking my life to keep my word. Snow or no snow, I would be on time for my scheduled donation at the local blood center.

When I got there, I discovered I wasn't alone. Four more "hero-types" were already lying back in donor chairs with lines attached to their veins, and machines quietly pumping away to collect their lifesaving gifts. At least two were donating whole blood while another might have been donating plasma and platelets—just as I was there to do.

Seeing my fellow donors in the process of honoring their own commitments gently reminded me that while I was proud to be there, I wasn't a hero. And it wasn't about me or, for that matter, about them either. Inclement weather doesn't negate the need for what we were doing, so any previously held silly heroic thoughts quickly disappeared as I lay back in my own contoured donor chair, my ear buds in place and the music lulling me to sleep as I began my one-and-a-half-hour donation procedure. I was ready to make a difference in the life of someone I'd never meet—while the swirling snow continued to blow outside the center's windows and cover everything it touched.

My wife Karen is a donor too. And more importantly, she has been on the bone marrow list for fifteen years, ever since she signed up to provide bone marrow to a kindergartner with leukemia. That little girl died before Karen's bone marrow could help her, but Karen was called again recently. Her test results were still on file, and it turned out she was a potential match for someone else. The caller came right to the point and asked Karen if she would still be willing to become a bone marrow donor. "Yes," she said and then immediately began answering questions in preparation for the pages of paperwork to follow—all of which would give way to further testing and hopefully the chance to save a life. It was a race against time.

I wish I could say that this race was won. It wasn't. The caller later thanked Karen for her participation and asked a few follow-up questions—including whether or not she'd remain on the donor list. "Of course," Karen answered, but I already knew she would. That's just who she is.

I'd never really thought about why I donate, or why Karen does. We just do. But a few months ago I learned that particular components that were to be harvested during one of my regular donations were earmarked specifically for a cancer patient and for somebody's newborn baby boy—both patients needing what I had to give in order to live. I've viewed our visits to the blood center differently ever since.

Last week Karen gave blood and next week I'll be eligible to make my usual donation. I'll clear an afternoon from my schedule and call for an appointment. Whether they need plasma and

platelets, whole blood or red cells, I'll gladly give because each are so desperately needed. And I don't know whose life my donation may affect, but it really doesn't matter. On any given day the person needing a blood product could be you or me or maybe a loved one, but most likely it will be a stranger. And sadly, while so few among us actually take the time to donate, Karen and I always will.

It may not be snowing right now, and while I'm still not a hero, I really do feel proud every time I donate. And to be perfectly honest, I like the feeling.

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the backstory:

I wrote this piece for my local newspaper—hoping that someone reading it might decide to donate. A year later and when Chicken Soup came calling for stories about volunteering and giving back, I submitted this piece to them. They liked it but changed a few things—like the title (originally it was called *It's not how much we give.*) That was okay with me—this time, because by appearing in the book, more readers might be exposed to the need; maybe then deciding to become donors.



I can only hope.

And about my donating: sometimes it's an imposition—especially if I'm giving plasma and platelets. It's time consuming. From the time I leave and until I return home again, 3-4 hours may pass, and my time is valuable.

But still I donate.

It can be uncomfortable. Sometimes, while those lifesaving components are being extracted from my blood, I might be watching the clock instead of the television, or listening to the music flowing from my iPod; maybe feeling a bit nauseous thanks to the anticoagulant that keeps that one donor vein on my right arm viable.



But still I donate.

Over the course of our lifetime, 80% of us will one day require platelets, plasma, red cells or whole blood while sadly only 5% of us give.

But still I donate.

I don't know whose life my donation may impact. It doesn't matter. On any given day it could be you, or a loved one, but most likely it will be for a stranger. I donate because I can, and a couple hours of my time every few months, and an occasionally queasy tummy may sometimes be the price I pay.

But still I donate.

The verbiage in this particular piece speaks for itself, and thus, becomes its own backstory. And as for Karen and me—we still continue to donate. I hope you will too.

the photos:

The first photo is Karen and me and was taken during a rare simultaneous donation—me donating plasma, platelets and red blood cells, and Karen, one pint of whole blood!

The second photo is of my daughter, Tracy at a donor event. While I don't have one of son, Michael donating, he too is a regular donor.



the original newspaper article:

It contained a little more story (and a different title) from the version that ultimately was published in the book.

It's not how much we give

BY STEPHEN RUSINIAK

I was feeling fairly proud of myself. The snow was falling and the roads had become treacherous. Schools were already calling for early dismissals, but my appointment, much to my surprise, wasn't cancelled. And so I went — all the while feeling especially heroic-like, after all, I was risking my life to keep the appointment — and thereby, my word, to be on time, snow or no snow, for my scheduled donation at the local blood center.

But when I got there, I wasn't alone.

Walking through the screening area I was surprised to see that there were four other hero-types lying back in donor chairs; lines already attached to their veins, machines quietly pumping away — receiving their life-saving gifts. At least two were donating whole blood, while another might have been donating plasma and platelets — just as I was there to do.

Seeing these donors in the process of honoring their own commitments gently reminded me that while I was proud to be there, it wasn't about me. Or them. Inclement weather doesn't negate the need for what we were doing, and so any previously held silly heroic thoughts quickly disappeared as I laid back in my own donor chair — ready to begin my hour and a half long donation procedure; ready to make a difference in the life of someone that I'd never met — all the while watching the swirling snow blowing outside one of the center's windows.

But indeed, sometimes it actually does take a hero to step forward; to say 'yes' in the hopes of saving a life.

The call came out of the blue; unexpectedly. After all, it had been 15 years. Karen, my wife, hadn't thought about it in some time — or at least about what she'd done. But the circumstances that caused her to do it in the first place would never be forgotten — especially whenever she saw the faces of the children: smiling, healthy and innocent, in the school, where she taught.

In a perfect world children would never know sickness. But here, in the real world, sometimes they do. And 15 years ago, one did.

She was in kindergarten, and she had leukemia. The situation was desperate. A call went out for those willing to be tested in

the hopes of locating a donor whose lifesaving bone marrow might make a difference. The community rallied, including the town's teachers. Including Karen.

Unfortunately, all of the support, the love and the prayers weren't enough.

But life goes on, and sometimes, before it can, extraordinary circumstances dictate an intervention, and hence, after so many years, the unforeseen call.

After 15 years, her test results were still on file, and Karen was a potential match for someone who was sick. The caller came right to the point and asked Karen if she were still willing to become a bone marrow donor? "Yes," she said and then immediately began answering a litany of cursory questions in preparation for the pages of paperwork to follow — all of which would give way to further testing and hopefully, ultimately, the chance to save a life. It quickly became a race against time.

I wish I could say that in the end, this race was won. It wasn't. The caller later thanked Karen for her participation and asked a few follow up questions — including whether or not she'd remain on the donor list. "Of course," Karen answered, but I knew she would because that's just who she is.

Mother Teresa once said, "It's not how much we give but how much love we put into giving." I'd never thought about it that way before; never considered why I donate, or why Karen does either. We just do. But a few months ago I learned that particular components that were to be harvested during one of my donations was earmarked specifically for a cancer patient and for someone's newborn baby boy — both patients needing what I had to give in order to live. I've viewed my visits to the blood center differently ever since.

Last week Karen gave blood and next week I'll be eligible again to make my usual donation. I'll clear an afternoon from my schedule and call for an appointment. Whether plasma and platelets, whole blood, or red cells, it doesn't matter — each are so desperately needed. And sadly, while so few of us actually donate, Karen and I always will. And you know what? I'm still feeling fairly proud about that, and I like the feeling.

Stephen Rusiniak of Wayne is a retired police officer and freelance writer.