

Meeting the stranger who saved my life

Julie Rhoades survived cancer thanks to an anonymous woman who donated her stem cells. Then she met her donor, and discovered they share many similarities, writes *Hannah Partos*

Julie Rhoades and Julie Merrilees don't just share the same name. They're both blonde and blue-eyed with a similar build and positive, chirpy attitude. Merrilees, 52, and Rhoades, 57, also share the same blood DNA – as close as identical twins – though they're not related. Merrilees is Rhoades' stem cell donor, who saved her life in 2009 after Rhoades was diagnosed with an aggressive form of blood cancer.

There are more than 27 million people on the worldwide stem cell registers, so Rhoades, a teaching assistant, was amazed to discover that her donor was also called Julie. Since last August they have met three times and become firm friends. "We have so much in common," says Rhoades, who is married with two adult children and two granddaughters and lives in Tunbridge Wells. "It's uncanny."

In June 2008, Rhoades, then 50, began to suffer from extreme fatigue and bruising on her legs.

She saw her GP and after a raft of tests, a haematology consultant diagnosed her with acute lymphoblastic leukaemia, an aggressive cancer of the white blood cells. It kills quickly if left untreated; Rhoades had to start chemotherapy the next day.

"I was in shock," she says. "One day I was at home leading a normal life, and the next I was in hospital." Months of gruelling treatment left her suffering from crippling nausea and mouth ulcers. Her daughter Nicola was five months pregnant at the time. "My biggest fear was not being around to see my first grandchild."

The chemotherapy helped control the cancer, but doctors told Rhoades



Friends: Julie Merrilees, top left, donated stem cells to help save Julie Rhoades

that a stem cell transplant – previously known as a bone marrow transplant – was her only chance of survival.

Stem cells are the "mother" cells that generate new cells – the building blocks of the human body – and those in the bone marrow produce our blood cells, including white blood cells which play a big role in immunity. Rhoades's own bone marrow would be destroyed by the chemo, and she would then be given a drip infusion of healthy stem cells from a donor, effectively installing in her a new immune system to fight the cancer.

But first she needed a donor. Her only sibling, a half-sister, was not compatible. Only around a third of UK patients in need of a stem cell transplant (because they have a blood cancer, or other haematological condition) find a sibling match. Most, like Rhoades, put their hope in a register of people who have volunteered to donate their cells. Each year, 2,000 people in the UK require a stem cell transplant, and the NHS Stem Cell Strategic Forum estimates that of these, around 355 are unable to find a well-matched donor in a timely fashion. Many will not survive.

"At times, I thought I wasn't going to make it," Rhoades says. But in early 2009, eight months after she was

placed on the waiting list for a donor, doctors announced that a match had been found and the transplant could go ahead. "It was a huge relief," Rhoades recalls. "This person had no idea who I was, and yet they were ready to save my life."

After the transplant, Rhoades had awful side-effects. "I had horrendous mouth ulcers and couldn't eat for several days. I was given morphine for the pain." She also suffered from kidney failure, fluid on her lungs and severe infections. But after a year, having recovered her strength, she was eager to contact her donor. "I wanted to thank this stranger who had given me a second chance at life."

Donors and patients are not allowed to know each others' identities for two years post-transplant, so Rhoades had to write an anonymous letter. A card came back: "I'm so happy to hear you're better."

In the summer of 2014, celebrating five years in remission, Rhoades sent another thank-you card to her donor.

'My biggest fear was not being around to meet my grandchild'

That Christmas, after more anonymous correspondence, they were finally given each others' names and contact details.

A self-confessed "adrenalin junkie", Merrilees had volunteered to give her stem cells at 39, after doing a fundraising skydive for Anthony Nolan, the charity that coordinates the register. "I had a strong instinct that I would be a match for someone one day," says Merrilees, who lives with her husband in Edinburgh. Six years later, she got the call she'd been waiting for. Donating was easy, she says - in most cases, stem cell donation is similar to giving blood. It's usually done in just one session.

In August 2015, the two Julies met at a London restaurant for the first time. They greeted each other with a hug; Rhoades had tears in her eyes.

Over lunch, they discussed the highs and lows of the past few years and found they have both survived breast cancer - Merrilees was diagnosed a year after donating her stem cells. "It seems so unfair, after she saved my life," Rhoades says.

They talked for hours and felt as if they'd known each other for years. "We have a similar outlook on life," Rhoades says. Merrilees agrees: "We're both very positive - we just grit our teeth and get on with things."

There is no scientific reason why two people with matching tissue type should be similar, says Professor Steve Marsh, deputy director of research at Anthony Nolan. "This is pure coincidence, donors and recipients tend to have a similar ethnic background, but that's all," he says. Merrilees's age makes her an unusual donor, he adds. Typical candidates are young men, as they tend to make the best donors. Medics would only opt for a woman in her forties if there were no other matches, suggesting Rhoades had a rare tissue type. "She is fortunate to be alive," he says.

Rhoades agrees that she is lucky in many ways. "Julie saved my life," she says. "But I've also made a new friend - for life."

If you're aged between 16 and 30, you can sign up to the stem cell register at anthonyolan.org. If you're over 30, but under 55, you can sign up to the Delete Blood Cancer register at dkms.org.uk/en/register-now