

W&M lineman 'a living, breathing example' of how easy it is to donate bone marrow

William & Mary reserve lineman Mark Williamson donated bone marrow to the program 'Be the Match' which used his donation to help save the life of a young boy battling blood cancer.



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Lineman Mark Williamson becomes W&M's second bone marrow donor in two years

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Neil Williamson was proud, but he was also a father. Part of that role was to make certain that his son, Mark, fully understood the gravity of what he was about to do.

"I said, 'You know, this is going to hurt for a few days,'" Neil said. "And he said, 'Dad, if I'm in pain for a

couple of days and I can save somebody's life, there's no choice.' This is something he wanted to do and considered himself lucky to be in a position to do."

A few months after swabbing his cheek at a bone marrow drive, William and Mary offensive lineman Mark Williamson was contacted by Be The Match, which operates a global registry of potential donors. That in itself defied odds: One in 430 people on the registry is ever called.

He drove to Richmond for blood work, which confirmed he was a match to donate bone marrow — soft tissue inside bones needed to create blood cells that carry oxygen, fight infection and help control bleeding. The recipient would be a teenage boy who had **leukemia**, a cancer of blood-forming tissues.

That was all Mark needed to hear, even if it would put his redshirt freshman season on hold.

"One of the greatest opportunities in life is to save a life," he said. "That's such a privilege. The biggest part was, no matter how tough it is, it's going to be saving someone's life."

W&M coach Jimmie Laycock had no reservations, either.

"Mark had a very positive attitude about the whole thing," Laycock said. "That doesn't surprise me because he's had a positive attitude about everything he's done since he's been here. This was something he could do to help people."

Neil Williamson is amazed at his son's maturity.

"I don't think at 19, I had the kind of perspective that Mark had with this decision," he said. "His first instinct was helping somebody else who he doesn't even know."

Mark underwent the procedure in mid-September, when doctors inserted a needle into both hip bones to extract bone marrow. He was out of the hospital the next day, and two weeks later he was walking without crutches.

"There was some soreness," he said, "but nothing dramatic."

Williamson was the second W&M football player to donate bone marrow in the last two calendar years. In November 2014, kicker John Carpenter interrupted his senior season after he got the call.

Think about that: There have been roughly 150 players on the **Tribe's** roster over the last three seasons, and two ended up being matches.

"I can't even tell you what those odds are," said Dan Gariepy, community engagement representative with Be The Match. "It's hard to even fathom that would happen."

William and Mary held its first bone marrow drive in 1991 to help a professor on campus. It eventually became known as the Alan Bukzin Memorial Drive, named after a student's brother who died of leukemia in 1996.

There are two events every year. Last spring, 128 names were added to the registry — including Williamson and several teammates.

"The national average for a bone marrow drive is 35," Gariepy said. "The students there who lead it do such a fantastic job."

In July 2015, the Colonial Athletic Association announced a league-wide partnership with Be The Match. Many schools, W&M included, already had joined Be The Match's "Get in the Game, Save a Life" program.

It's been more than a month since Williamson's surgery. He hasn't been cleared to practice yet, but Neil said he's doing exercises like running on a treadmill and in a pool.

Carpenter only missed two games in 2014, but he underwent a less-invasive procedure. He donated blood-forming stem cells that circulate in the blood rather than in bone marrow, which doctors can remove by a needle in the arm.

Williamson, whose only game action came against **N.C. State** in the opener, hopes to be able to return to practice soon.

"It's been hard since I've played so much the last four or five years," he said. "But it was for a good cause, and I'd definitely do it over again."

As for the recipient, Williamson hasn't been told much. Neither party is allowed to contact the other for at least a year, and then it must be with mutual consent. Anonymous correspondence is allowed, but only if it goes through Be The Match.

As for the drive, he's not done. Williamson still can donate again, though the odds of being called twice are even greater than 1-in-430. He plans to help out in future Bukzin drives, front and center.

"I can be a living, breathing example of how easy it is," he said. "Who would have thought a swab of my cheek, five minutes of my time, would lead to saving a life? It was a real honor."

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