

COURAGE, LIFE & HOPE

REFLECTIONS *of a journey*



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Rhonda Jensen

Most people count themselves lucky if they make one or two lasting and dependable friendships in their lifetime. Rhonda Jensen was lucky enough to find a loving and selfless friend in Elly Bertrand – even before the two had ever met.

After graduating from college, Rhonda took a substitute teaching job in her hometown of Medford, hoping it would lead to a fulltime position. After battling a cold throughout the fall, Rhonda visited the doctor. Blood tests and a bone-marrow biopsy discovered a terrifying diagnosis: Acute leukemia. And while none of Rhonda's family members proved a match for donating marrow, the Red Cross national donor list turned up a viable candidate and, against all odds, the donor was from nearby Mondovi.

Elly had registered years earlier after seeing a newspaper story about a young boy who needed a bone marrow transplant. As the mother of three boys, she thought about how devastating it would be if one of her sons needed a transplant, only to have no match. When Elly got a call that an unknown cancer patient needed a transplant, she didn't hesitate. Although the chances of a match were just 25 percent, the blood test indicated that she was an excellent match for Rhonda.

The transplant was successful, and Elly saved Rhonda's life for the first time. Although the recovery was slow, Rhonda's white blood count rose. After a year, during a medical checkup, Rhonda finally was given the name of her donor and was surprised to learn how near Elly lived.

"I didn't meet Elly right away," Rhonda

said. "I just didn't know how to go about thanking her for saving my life." Instead, Rhonda wrote to Elly, and a friendship grew through the exchange of letters and photos.

The two ultimately met face to face at Rhonda's wedding shower; at the wedding, Elly was an honored guest.

But soon thereafter, Rhonda's health declined. Her kidneys, which had been damaged by aggressive leukemia treatments, were functioning at just 10 percent. She again was told she needed a transplant, and that no family member was a suitable match. The transplant specialist suggested she contact Elly.

"There was no way I could see myself asking her," Rhonda said. "How do you ask someone who has given so much to give even more?"

Ultimately, she sent a letter to Elly. It took four months to write the five-page letter, and nowhere did Rhonda specifically ask for her friend to donate a kidney. After

reading Rhonda's letter, Elly called the hospital transplant coordinator that same day, requesting information. She underwent physical and psychological tests, and was cleared to give again.

Then she called Rhonda and said, "Are you busy on May 5?"

That day, Elly played the part of Rhonda's guardian angel. The transplant was successful. It was the first time in history that a nonrelative had made a marrow and an organ donation to the same recipient.

"Elly's taught me everything I need to know about angels," Rhonda said.

