

# 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 submitted for consideration an Op-Ed to my local newspapers back in the summer of 2014 concerning the urgent need for blood donors. As a regular donor myself, I was well aware of the stats—aware that while so few among us donate, so many of us, (in fact, 80%), will, during our lifetime, require some donated blood-derived component. It was my hope that someone reading my piece might then decide to become a donor.

The following year when Chicken Soup came calling for stories about volunteering and giving back, I submitted this piece. They liked it but changed a few things—like the title (originally called ***It's not how much we give.***) That was okay with me—this time, anyway, because by appearing in the book, readers could then be more-so exposed to the need for donors, and then (hopefully), decide to become a donor themselves.

One can only hope.

### ***the photo:***

My favorite donor photo is not of Karen or me, but instead, it's of our daughter, Tracy. It was taken during a Boy Scout/Eagle Scout project held on behalf of the very same organization for which Karen and I donate. And while he wasn't photographed, our son, Michael had also donated during this event as well.

