

RACE AGAINST TIME

Torrance employer leads drive for marrow donor



Simon Ridgway is fighting two forms of leukemia.

By Kristin Veitch
STAFF WRITER

Simon Ridgway is fighting a vicious battle with leukemia. But thanks to his Torrance employer, he has an army around the globe helping him to search for what he needs most: a perfect stranger.

The 30-year-old father of three is at war with two forms of the disease. His only hope for survival is a bone-marrow transplant from someone he has never met.

Phenomenex, a Torrance-based biotechnical company with offices around the world, has organized an in-

ternational campaign to save his life.

Ridgway worked for Phenomenex in Manchester, England, until his diagnosis — following a routine checkup — in July 1998. When Fasha Mahjoor, the company's president, heard about Ridgway's illness, he flew to England to visit him and launched an effort to find a marrow match.

On Friday, Phenomenex will hold a bone-marrow registration drive at its Torrance headquarters, 411 Madrid Ave., and will pick up the tab for the tests, which usually cost \$35 to \$90 per person. Volunteers can join the Nation-

MARROW/A8



BRAD GRAVERSON/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Fasha Mahjoor hopes to find a bone-marrow donor for one of his employees.

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Marrow

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al Marrow Donor Program for free, and possibly save a life.

Mahjoor, a Rancho Palos Verdes resident, has spared no expense in his crusade. He has kept Ridgway on the payroll, recruited employees in five countries to help him and paid the bill for marrow drives in the United Kingdom and the United States.

Ridgway said he's grateful to Mahjoor and other co-workers who have poured energy into the campaign.

"I feel very indebted to Fasha for everything he's done," he said. "Right from the word go, they've supported us, and it's just very heartwarming to know there are still lots of people who care."

Mahjoor, who has small children of his own, dismisses any praise for his actions. He says if he were in Ridgway's position, he would expect nothing less.

"I feel it's my duty as an employer to do this for any one of my employees. When you have the resources, how can you deny someone a second chance in life?"

Mahjoor has asked some of his most valuable employees to put their normal duties on hold and help the campaign, dubbed The Kindness of Strangers. Caroline Entwistle, manager of human resources, has devoted the past three months solely to Ridgway's fight.

"This is the most rewarding thing I've ever been involved with," she said. "It's quite a feeling to know you're dealing with saving

MARROW DRIVE

- **When:** 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Friday.
- **Where:** 411 Madrid Ave., one block east of the corner of Crenshaw Boulevard and 208th Street in Torrance.
- **What's Needed:** A few drops of blood will be taken from each volunteer and tested. If the marrow matches a leukemia patient, participants will be notified and given full details of the transplant procedure.
- **Requirements:** Donors must be 18 to 60 and must not be pregnant.
- **More information:** Call Emmet Welch at 310-212-0555, Ext. 327.
- **Donor registry:** The American Bone Marrow Donor registry can be reached at 800-843-2949.

someone's life."

Ridgway's leukemia recently had been in remission and he planned to fly to Los Angeles for Friday's event, but his condition worsened last week and he was placed in isolation. He said he was disappointed he couldn't visit the co-workers who had gone so far to help him.

"After everything they've done, the least I wanted to do was show my face, help out," Ridgway said.

In the year since his diagnosis, Ridgway has spent several months in isolation, where he can communicate with friends and family only by telephone.

With a wife and three small children, that hasn't been easy. Ridgway said he has seen little of his 9-month-old daughter, Nafasha, and misses his son, Kleren, 6, and his daughter, Danielle, 8.

Unlike most other leukemia sufferers, Ridgway is battling two diseases simultaneously. The first, acute lymphoblastic leukemia, is treatable with radiotherapy and chemotherapy. The only cure for the second, chronic myelogenous leukemia, is a bone-marrow transplant.

Because none of his relatives matched, Ridgway can only hope for a donation from a stranger. A transplant would give him about a 40 percent chance of survival.

Last year, when Ridgway went for a checkup at his doctor's office, the last thing he expected to hear was that he was dying.

"It was such a bolt from the blue. I'd never even been in the hospital before, and then the doctors just phoned me one day to tell me," he said.

"When they tell you, you immediately think that's it. But you just have to get on with it, don't you?"

The Kindness of Strangers campaign has helped Ridgway do just that. His story has sparked media attention across England, and although it's exhausting, he won't stop giving interviews and generating support for the donor program.

"It's just something I've got to do. If it doesn't bring about a donor for me, at least maybe it will help someone else in my position.

"And if I can bring any good out of all this, then it's not so bad now, is it?"

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