



Kurt Ellison

Castroville friends and neighbors of Oscar Lerma have stepped up the effort to find a bone marrow donor for 13-year-old Oscar Lerma.

## Castroville family intensifies search for marrow donor

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As the health of a 13-year-old Castroville cancer victim continues to decline, the community is stepping up efforts to keep the boy alive.

During the latest cooperative venture to benefit Oscar Lerma, 54 people last weekend were screened for their compatibility as bone marrow donors.

"Bone marrow is going to save Oscar's life," said June Radicchi, who participated in the drive Sunday at Richards Hall. There, volunteers were shown a video presentation, filled out forms and had blood drawn.

Those selected as donors will be directed to the San Francisco office of the Heart of America Bone Marrow Registry for bone marrow removal, a procedure performed under general or local anesthesia.

To the dismay of organizers such as Oscar's former teacher, Carol Brandt, it was learned people of Latino heritage rarely come forth as donors. In response, they issued a plea to the public to participate. A federal grant pays for the cost of screening minorities.

Also, genetic ancestry is a factor in assessing compatibility, and so those members of Oscar's large extended family who are not considered health risks have undergone preliminary screening. Oscar is the eldest of Alejandro and Margie Gil's three children.

The youth was diagnosed with leukemia two years ago as a fifth-grader at Echo Valley School, and entered Stanford Children's Hospital. He hasn't returned to school since.

Meanwhile, he's been "in and out" of hospitals, received a

bone marrow transplant utilizing his own tissue, undergone extensive chemotherapy, gone into remission and has become ill again. There's been a nose hemorrhage he tried to hide and bruises showing up beneath his eyes.

Prior to his being diagnosed, Oscar was among the more "fisty" youngsters in Brandt's class, "one of those you can't miss."

But following the Christmas holidays when an uncle died, Oscar returned to class with a subdued demeanor. By then, the ravages of his disease began taking their toll on his slight body.

His family first noticed the change during an Arroyo Seco outing. "He was just sitting down and he didn't want to do anything," said his aunt, Gloria Castro.

Oscar soon gave up playing first base for Sea Mist Farms of the Gambetta Little League. But baseball hasn't been forgotten. Following an Oakland A baseball game, he met Ricky Henderson and even got to take home his hero's gloves, bat and cap. The home team beat the Kansas City Royals that day on a Mark McGuire grand slam.

At home, Oscar is hoping to outscore his cancerous opponent, making plans to form a band in which he'll be the drummer, talking on the telephone of wishful plans, like a trip to Disneyland with his cousins and friends.

The Castroville Rotary Club has raised funds to help Oscar's family, and Echo Valley School children donated recycling program proceeds to the cause.

Anyone wishing to participate in the bone marrow drive can call 722-3406 or 633-5527.