

'Your gift is the best one ever - the gift of life'

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THE letter was simply addressed: "Dear Mr Donor", and as Shaw McIntyre read on, the sudden realisation of what he had just done became overwhelming.

"My daughter will be three years old this month," he read, "and your gift is the best one I could ever have asked for: the gift of a new life."

There aren't many things that can shake a burly West Lothian roofer to the soles of his working boots, but for father-of-three Shaw, discovering he had just helped save the life of a little girl 6000 miles away was enough to bring a lump to his throat.

"My daughter was the same age at the time it was happening," recalls the 45-year-old. "I thought how I would feel if it were any of my children going through all of that, and it brought home what it all meant to this family."

Today, the letter has pride of place on the wall behind the desk of Shaw's Whitburn offices. The little girl his bone marrow helped save – whose chances of survival at the time were put at less than 50 per cent – is now a pretty teenager growing up in Virginia, USA.

Their connection might well have ended there, with little Rachel Rack on the road to recovery and Shaw's name back on the bone marrow donors' roll just in case anyone else could benefit from his kindness.

Instead, Shaw's selfless donation to a sick leukaemia patient has developed into a transatlantic friendship and a unique bond between two families.

Every year, he and his family – wife Liz, 43, sons Phillip, 18, Stewart, 16, and Amanda, 13 – make the trip to Virginia to visit the Rack family, where they are made welcome by Rachel's grateful parents.

Just recently, Rachel and her mother Mary made the emotional journey to Scotland to pay their own tribute to the man who saved her life.

For Shaw, the friendship that has blossomed between two families on different sides of the Atlantic has been an added bonus. It has been a bittersweet footnote to what started off as a family tragedy of his own – the sudden death of his mother-in-law. Shaw and his wife were still grieving for her mum June Hynds when they made the joint decision to try to help others.



HONOUR: Shaw and Rachel at the Anthony Nolan Trust awards

“My mum-in-law died of a brain tumour when she was in her early 60s,” Shaw said. “It was a difficult time and it made us realise how terrible it is when a member of your close family becomes really ill.

“Around two weeks after she died, we noticed something in the paper about the Anthony Nolan Bone Marrow Trust, and thought it would be something we could do. I’d been a blood donor for a long time, and this felt like an extension of what I was doing.”

It was January 1996 when the couple gave a small sample of blood, which was then analysed and entered on to the register. By April, Shaw had been identified as a partial match for Rachel. Further tests would confirm that he was a suitable donor.

“It was a bit of a shock to find it was going ahead,” he recalls. “There was a lot of emotion, even though I didn’t know where my marrow would go, and there was a great fear of anything going wrong. It didn’t matter at the time who got it – whether it was a young girl or an older man – it was just the fact that it was hopefully going to help someone.”

In Virginia, Rachel’s family had been struggling to cope with her illness. “It was October of 1994 when I found a small bruise on Rachel’s thigh,” recalls her mum. “The doctor carried out a biopsy and we received a call a few days later that Rachel had lymphoma. She was ten months old.”

She received six months of gruelling chemotherapy before finally going into remission for a year. But there was bad news when doctors confirmed her lymphoma had transformed into B-cell leukaemia, and her 92 per cent survival chance had plunged to 50 per cent.

“We were devastated,” adds Mary. “The doctors got her into remission again but we were desperately seeking a bone marrow donor. None of the family matched her.”

But despair turned to hope when Rachel was placed on the International Bone Marrow Transplant Registry at around the same time as Shaw was entering his details. Within weeks the match was made and Rachel received Shaw’s bone marrow – along with an angel brooch, which he had asked to be sent along with it – on Hallowe’en 1996.

Grateful to the anonymous donor who had selflessly helped save her daughter’s life, Mary sat down to pen her emotional letter – the one that today sits in Shaw’s office.

Rules on bone marrow donations mean it can be as much as two years before donor and recipient are able to find out each other’s identities. But the special circumstances of Shaw and Rachel’s case – and with both sides desperate to learn more about each other – the families were soon appealing for the rules to be relaxed.

The moment Shaw received Mary and dad Ed’s details, he picked up the phone to call.

“I’d been told it was a little girl who received the donation – that was particularly emotional because she was the same age as Amanda,” said Shaw, of East Main Street in Whitburn. “I’d had regular updates on how she was, but this was the first time I was able to speak to them. Mary answered the phone and I could tell it was a total shock to hear my voice. It was very emotional.

“I asked her how her little girl was and explained that I’d just found out her name.

“But I don’t think either of us was really able to have a proper conversation.”

Mary agrees it was among the most exciting phone calls of her life. “We had just got his name and address too and saw that he was from Scotland, when we received a phone call,” she recalls.

“The person on the other end of the phone had a strange accent and I thought to myself – this is him. I was so excited to hear his voice.

“He asked how Rachel was doing and wanted to come over for a visit. We were going to get to meet the man that saved Rachel’s life. From the moment we met him he was like family to us. He has been over to see us every year since then.”

The families were reunited recently when both were guests of honour at the Anthony Nolan fundraising ball in Glasgow. Shaw was recognised that night as one of the charity’s most hardworking fundraisers, having raised more than £10,000 by completing a string of intimidating challenges, from climbing Mount Kilimanjaro to completing the Inca Trail in Peru.

Today, he remains on the bone marrow register along with Liz and their son, Phillip – and he says he would urge anyone to think seriously about doing the same.

“You never know who might be out there who needs help,” he stresses. “It’s been wonderful to be able to help Rachel and I’ve met a fantastic family as a result of it.”

As for Mary and Rachel, they can’t thank Shaw enough. “You know, I really can’t put into words what Shaw and his family mean to us,” says Mary. “He is family. We can never repay him for what he has given to Rachel and our family, but he will always hold a special place in our hearts. He is true hero to us.”