

A Brother's Gift of Life

Following a life-saving stem cell transplant, Nora Nagaruck and Wil Ivanoff share more than most sisters and brothers.

BOB SMIETANA

Nora Nagaruck's future lay in the small plastic bag in her brother Wil's hands. Labeled AB—Wil's blood type—the bag contained some eight million of his bone-marrow stem cells, the best hope for treating the acute myelocytic leukemia (AML) that threatened Nora's life.

On July 7, as nurses hooked up the bag to a port in Nora's chest, Nora, her husband, Nathan, and Wil watched the steady stream of reddish liquid drain from the bag as it made its way directly to Nora's heart. The theme from *Chariots of Fire*, Nora's favorite film, played in the background.

Nora and Wil's mother, Elizabeth Oyoumick, watched on in awe, thankful for the wonders of modern medicine, and grateful to God. Twenty-six years ago, AML took the life of her first husband, Glenn Ivanoff.

When she first heard Nora's diagnosis, Elizabeth didn't want to believe it. "It just couldn't be one of my own children getting leukemia," she says. "I just knew I had to help them get through it."

Now she has hope that Nora's life will be spared. "It's amazing—Wil is giving her years of her life back," Elizabeth said in recalling the day of the stem cell transplant.

A DREAM DEFERRED

The stem cell transplant is the first step in a year-long recovery process for Nora. She spent the first seventeen days in the hospital, and is now recuperating in a small apartment near the hospital grounds in Seattle. Most days, she says, "We're just hanging around here, trying to eat and drink and not throw up."

By now, Nora had hoped to be practicing medicine in a small village in Alaska. She was in the last year of a family practice residency when she first got sick.

"I had my whole life planned out," says Nora. "Now I don't know what's going to happen next week."

Nora, who grew up in the Evangelical Covenant Church in Unalakleet, Alaska, has dreamed of being a doctor since she was a teenager. After eleven years of training—four years at the University of Oklahoma, another four at the University of Washington medical school, a year of internship, and two years of residency—her dream was almost a reality.

Then she got what she thought was a cold last summer. When her nagging sore throat and fatigue wouldn't go away, she wondered if it was something worse. Perhaps strep throat, or mononucleosis, brought on by the de-

mands of her residency. She often had to spend the night at the hospital during her rounds, where she was lucky to catch an hour or two of sleep.

But the strep test came back negative, and while she waited for results from the mono test, Nora felt worse and worse. "I had never been that sick before," Nora says. "It felt like the life was being taken out of me."

Blood tests revealed that Nora had an abnormally high blood count, a sign of leukemia. On July 9, 2004, four days after their first wedding anniversary, Nora and Nathan arrived in Seattle to begin her cancer treatments. There Nora learned she had AML, the same disease that killed her father in 1979 and her nephew in 2000.

The Nagaruks spent several months in Seattle while she was undergoing treatment, then returned home to Anchorage to continue chemotherapy. Her cancer has put her training on hold, as Nora has been too sick to return to her residency.

Sometimes she gets angry at God for letting her get so close to becoming a doctor, then putting her life on hold. "I was so close to finishing—in my last year of this twelve-year journey," Nora says. "Why couldn't I have gotten sick at the end of my residency?"

Still, she adds, "you can't stop liv-

“Our motto is day by day—I can’t make my decision until the transplant is over.”

garuks to post updates of Nora’s condition and the progress of her treatment, and to receive emails and messages.

It’s a lot easier than trying to “repeat the same story to fifty different people,” says Nathan, who’s been able to focus on taking care of Nora and not worry as much about keeping everyone informed.

Nathan says his job is mostly to support Nora and make sure she takes her medication—nine pills in the morning, five more at night, plus a constant IV. An avid outdoorsman who enjoys fishing and hunting, Nathan spends his days cooking, doing the laundry, and keeping house and home together.

“Poor Nathan,” Nora says. “He didn’t know what he was in for when he married me.”

One of Nora’s friends, Phil Hofstetter, was inspired to raise funds for



Wil Ivanoff with his sister Nora Nagaruk, on the day of the stem cell transplant



Nathan and Nora Nagaruk

ing” in the face of cancer. “You have to keep going. But how do you find normal?” she asks. “You’ve got to find something that feels normal.”

A MIRACLE DONOR

After taking several months off from chemotherapy to build up Nora’s strength, the Nagaruks returned to Seattle in June to prepare for a transplant. The fact that Wil is a perfect donor match for his sister seems a kind of miracle.

When Nora’s father was diagnosed with AML in the 1970s, doctors told him that because of the cancer treatments he would likely never have any

more children. But he went into remission for a short time before his death, and during that time Wil was conceived.

“The doctors told us not to try to have more children,” Elizabeth says. “Well, we weren’t trying, and along he came.”

Elizabeth pauses, and then says, “God has been in all of this and just knitted it all together.”

Throughout her illness, Nora says she has been surrounded by the love and care of family and friends. A website called thestatus.com allows the Na-

leukemia by rowing a sea kayak more than 1,000 miles from Nome to Barrow, Alaska.

Hofstetter’s trip coincided with the stem cell transplant, and Nora tracked his progress from her hospital room. Hofstetter started a thirty-four-mile

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row across the Kotzebue Sound about the same time Nora started her pre-transplant chemotherapy.

“Once you’ve started (to row across that sound) you can’t turn back,” she said during chemo. “And that’s exactly where I am once I start chemo. There is no turning back once you start the chemo process . . . I can’t give up or he’d be rowing for nothing.”

Phil keeps in touch with the Nagarrucks by satellite phone. Nora says the updates have helped her keep going. By the end of July, he was rounding Icy Cape and was less than 200 miles from Barrow, says Nora.

“He says that if he wasn’t rowing for a cause, he would have probably given up long ago, because it’s just so hard,” she says. “I think he’s going to make it, and I think I am going to make it too.”

THE ROAD BACK

Doctors tell Nora she’s progressing

well after the stem cell transplant. She will remain in Seattle until the fall. The next major milestone will be a series of tests done ninety days post-transplant that will determine whether she is well enough to go home.

She retained a sense of humor throughout her treatment. During her first round, a friend gave her a t-shirt that read “Es-Chemo Survivor” (Nora is part Alaska Native.) Now she’s going to get one that says, “Wil-Powered” in reference to her brother’s bone marrow cells. Since doctors killed off all of her marrow before the transplant, all of her blood cells now carry Wil’s DNA. “They are all boy cells,” she says, “with XY chromosomes.” She jokes that if she were ever to commit a crime, she could leave a drop of her blood at the scene and the CSI staff would think Wil had done it.

Looking to the future, Nora wonders sometimes if she will ever realize her dream of becoming a doctor. The trans-

plant may leave her with chronic side effects that would make the demands of a doctor’s life impossible. She’s planning to return to her residency program next July, following a year of recovery ordered by her doctors.

“But that’s penciled in,” she says. “Our motto is day by day—I can’t make my decision until the transplant is over.”

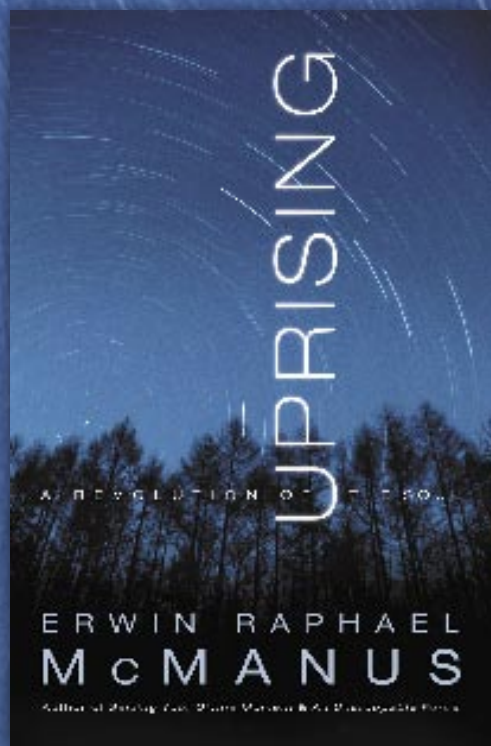
If any good comes out of her illness, Nora says, it will be that she better understands what it’s like to be a patient. “It’s different being on this side,” she says. “Nausea, for example, has a whole new meaning.”

The illness has also changed the ways she views God. “I feel like he is taking care of me physically, it’s been made more tangible,” she says. “You know things about God’s character—that he is loving and caring—but when you are lying in a hospital bed and you can feel people praying for you, it’s like God has come down to my bedside.” □

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