

Let's squash leukemia

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It is the middle of the night and Genevieve Duford awakens with a thirst. She heads down to the kitchen, pours herself a glass of orange juice, and then suddenly passes out.

For no apparent reason.

"Wow, that's weird, I wonder what happened?" she asked herself upon waking up on the kitchen floor.



fortunately unscathed.

Duford is 15 years old and an accomplished high school athlete. This shouldn't be happening.

Genevieve Duford (right) has her brother Alexander to thank for her life. His bone marrow match gave her life after she had a remission of the cancer nearly two years ago.

But, come to think of it, she has been feeling a bit sluggish lately.

She is playing for Richmond's Air Attack volleyball at the provincial championships and not really sure what's going on. With no history of cancer in her family, that can't be it.

But it is cancer. Acute lymphocytic leukemia to be exact, a type of blood cancer that is the most common type of leukemia in children under age 15.

"It came on like a wild brush fire," says Duford's mom, Bonnie.

Bonnie encouraged her daughter, already demonstrating the independence that is a strong personality trait today, to accompany her to see a doctor.

"She was a typical teenager, burning the candle at both ends," she explains. "I said if you can muster up the energy I think we should go have this checked out. We had a pediatrician at the time and went over to his office. He took one look at her, wrote a letter, and sent her right over to the emergency ward at (B.C.) Children's Hospital."

Doctors asked that she stay overnight for observation, but the next day when Bonnie came in they asked to keep Genevieve for an additional day.

"Are you looking for something in particular?" Bonnie asked a doctor.

“Yes, we are,” he replied. “We suspect leukemia.”

“Well, how strong do you suspect leukemia?,” she asked.

“Ninety-nine per cent. We’re just trying to isolate the strains she would have,” he said.

The diagnosis was confirmed April 28, 1997, and Genevieve began chemotherapy May 1, the same day her 11-year-old brother Alexander was writing entrance exams to get into Vancouver College school.

“She was a very sick little puppy,” Bonnie says.

But just one-third of the way through her chemotherapy, Genevieve balked at continuing the treatment.

“It created a big uproar,” Genevieve says. “I said no more, I can’t do it anymore. I got stomach infections, which is a side effect of the treatment, but I wasn’t fighting like the rest of the kids. I knew my body needed a rest. I was thinking I would take a rest for a little while and then I’ll come back. But they (doctors) said if you leave now you’ll be dead in three months.”

During this period, it was also learned that Alexander was a match to donate his bone marrow. But, again, Genevieve wasn’t having any of that.

“(Doctors) couldn’t understand,” she explains. “I had a match with my brother and they could give a chance at life. Why wasn’t I taking it?”

Fortunately, the family heard about a new experimental treatment which involved injections of cow’s colostrum.

Though it was expensive, more than \$10,000, and controversial, Bonnie and her husband Ray Duford decided to give it their blessing. The community rallied around them too, and helped to fund the procedures.

For eight years, Genevieve was free of cancer.

Then came a remission.

She was 22 years old and enjoying New Year’s Eve with her then-boyfriend in Las Vegas when her gums began the bleed.

“I was like, I wonder what this is,” Genevieve says. “Ah, it’s nothing.”

There were none of the symptoms, like fatigue, she’d experienced prior to be diagnosed with leukemia as a teenager. A day before returning to classes at Capilano College in January, she went snowboarding with her boyfriend on Cypress Mountain. She banged her head and thought, well since her annual bloodcheck was due she may as well go in for a checkup.

“It was a fluke,” she says. “I was in class when I got the call the next day to go to (Vancouver General Hospital).”

“Come on, guys,” she said. “Why do you want me to go to the leukemia ward? Then I thought, oh, it’s just protocol.”

There, she saw Dr. Steve Nantel who said he was 99.9 per cent sure she had leukemia again.

“I lost it,” she says. “I couldn’t believe it.”

“At 15, yeah I had cancer but I thought oh, I’m going to miss some school. I didn’t even contemplate death. Now as an adult I was able to realize the treatment I was going to go through and all the possible side effects like possible blinding and heart failure.

“Excuse me?” she said. “Is this supposed to be helping me or harming me? I’d just gotten a serious boyfriend, and my brother was a little older. I didn’t want my family to go through it all again.”

Unfortunately, the injections of cow’s colostrum was no longer a sufficient treatment for her. Reluctantly, she agreed to accept her brother’s bone marrow; somewhat pacified by the fact the procedure was much less invasive than it would have been in 1997.

“The first time it was still through the back and there was a risk of paralyzing. I wasn’t going to put that risk on a 11-year-old boy.”

Now, she laughs, she and her brother Alexander are like two peas in a pod.

“We were close before, but I think when we got through something like this it makes you that much closer,” she explains.

“Now I not only have his hair colour (she was a natural blond and her hair is now light brown) but also his allergies and weird tastes.”

Alexander, 22, and a recent graduate of the University of Ottawa was in the midst of his second year playing basketball for the Gee-Gees, who were gearing up for the national championships when he learned of his sister’s condition.

“It was a no-brainer (to donate the bone marrow),” he said. “I was lucky enough to be a match and with the new advances it was a pretty easy process. It was kind of like giving blood for a long time.”

Alexander said when his sister was first diagnosed with leukemia, when he was 11 years old, his parents kept him occupied with other things and he never really appreciated what was happening. But as an adult he knew the severity of the situation.

He learned his sister had gone into remission from his girlfriend Jessica, who had taken a call from Genevieve.

“At first I was confused and frustrated at the same time,” he says. “But I feel blessed and happy to be able to help my sister. A lot of people don’t get a chance to help people out this way.”

He said it has also expanded his understanding of cancer, and how prevalent leukemia is.

The Dufords have always put their faith in God. And going through what they have with Genevieve has only strengthened their faith.

“I was quite independent and rebellious as a kid and I still think I have that part of rebellion in me,” Genevieve says. “I think it’s one of the things that’s helped me to survive. But I grew up going to church and for me faith is a big thing. There are times when nothing seems to be going right, but I feel 100 per cent fortunate to have had cancer. It sucks to go through it, but the things I’ve learned and the people I’ve met who go above and beyond to make a difference while they’re here (have made it worthwhile).

“I think everybody is chosen to do something.”