

Lisa's Story: "Not Necessarily."

Lisa Lockerby was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL) in 1991

Written by: B. J. Kemp (October 16th, 2003)

"DOES this mean I'm going to die?" Lisa asked innocently to Dr. Nantel, the hematologist at the Vancouver General Hospital. He had just diagnosed her with leukemia.

"Not necessarily" was his reply. These simple words of hope became Lisa's lifeline for the next five months while her treatments pushed her to the edge of death, threatening, but never taking.

Lisa's bone marrow transplant was on January 27th 1992. She was thirty-three years old. It was also her sister's birthday. Lisa was admitted to the hospital on January 19th. For four days they loaded her up with 'humongous doses of chemo.' Then she had three days of total body radiation; everything but the lungs. They were killing off all her bone marrow

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to allow her body to accept the marrow from her sister, Gail. One drug was so potent it turned the intravenous line going into her body to cement.

"They take you down so close to death," she said.

Her 39-year-old sister flew in from Ottawa the day before; she was a perfect bone marrow match. At 8 am, they extracted 1 ½ litres of Gail's bone marrow from four places in her hip. They cleaned and washed her marrow, extracting a potentially lethal germ. At 3 pm, the pink gelatinous material was infused into Lisa's main vein. It should have taken 2-4 hours, but for Lisa, it took 9 minutes.

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“My heart started pumping so fast. My face went beet red, and I told everyone to leave the room, I was going to be sick. The next day I barfed, and I barfed for the next three weeks, I was barfing from my toes! Then I got mouth sores – cankers throughout my mouth, down my throat and into my chest. For three weeks I couldn’t even suck ice cubes.” She walked out of the hospital 25 days later, free of leukemia, and with a deeper understanding for the kindness of the human spirit.

Lisa is my hero. She embraces life as a gift. She is fortunate to be alive and knows it. Her zest for life oozes out of her sly smile and joyful little laugh that defines her. She looks great; short blond hair, stylishly cut. Make-up accentuating her looks, applied with precision. Her clothes, always co-coordinated. Her success lies in her great sense of humour, determination, ‘just do it’ attitude and the unselfish support from numerous friends, neighbours, doctors, nurses and family.

Lisa and I grew up in the same neighbourhood. We attended school together from Kindergarten to Grade Twelve. Although I don’t see Lisa on a regular basis, our past binds us in a comfortable way. I recently met with Lisa in a small café to try and capture the secret to her recovery.

“Everyone stopped their lives.” She said, “It’s amazing what family do for each other.”

It began Friday October 19th, 1991. Lisa’s family doctor phoned and requested she come to his office. After 3 weeks of suffering from migraines and night sweats, she was looking for answers. He immediately sent her to the hospital for testing. She may have leukemia. Monday morning she was back at the hospital for a bone marrow biopsy. Her anxiety level was contained because she’d been told the results would take one week. However, after a 2:30 pm ultrasound Lisa and her husband Dave were told to go straight to the doctor’s office.

“Do you think they know now?” Lisa asked Dave.

“We went to his office and I knew, I just knew.”

Dr. Nantel broke the news to them.

“He was sad to tell us,” Lisa said. “He’s a year older than I am and his wife is my age and they had children our kids’ age, it was hitting way too close to home for him.”

Always the competitor, Lisa’s response to the diagnosis was, “Okay then, what do we have to do to get through this?” Her acceptance of the disease and unlimited support, helped make Dr. Nantel’s words ‘not necessarily’ come true.

Lisa is the middle child of a family of four. Gail her oldest sister, her bone marrow donor, lived in Ottawa with her two children. Douglas, married, lived in Vancouver, and her younger 25-year-old sister Amanda, was about to embark on a teaching job in Japan.

On the day of her diagnosis, Lisa's parents were at her house preparing dinner for them. Amanda was looking after their children. No one was expecting bad news.

"We walked in, and mom said in a cheery voice 'hi!'. I just stood there." Lisa said, "Our whole world changed right away. My dad sobbed. He didn't want me to see him cry. He went into the bathroom, my mom ran after him, then I ran after her and the three of us were standing in this little bathroom. My mom said, 'Why couldn't this be me?' and I said, 'You know what Mom, I'm younger and I'm stronger and I'll fight this way better than you could. That's the attitude I took on right away the minute I was diagnosed.'"

When I asked Lisa how Amanda contributed to her healthy success her reply was,

"Amanda? What didn't she do? Amanda was fantastic. She came up to me and said, 'Don't worry about a thing. I've got things covered!'" She cancelled her Japan trip, moved into the basement suite, and took over all child care of their 3 and 5-year-old boys. "I didn't have to worry about a thing."

Lisa was in the hospital the next day for five weeks. Her parents stopped their lives. They came every day. Her mom brought her a clean pressed night gown daily and colourful socks to brighten her life. Her dad went to the video store and brought her a different comedy every day. He was available for her 24/7. She could call on him, requesting food to satisfy her bizarre food cravings. Her friends brought her food. Food was delivered to her family. Her best friend Sandy, phoned her every day from Los Angeles. Her husband Dave, visited her every day on his way home from work.

Douglas, her tall blond brother, had wanted so badly to be the donor; he wanted to help. After her transplant she

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was heavily sedated, and she remembers seeing Douglas, just sitting there beside her for hours on end, being there, in his quiet, gentle way.

Today
she works
for the Cancer
Society. She is a
living example of
her company's
motto: Cancer
can be
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Lisa's diagnosis sent her body into chaos. She was bombarded for eight weeks with chemo; four weeks in the hospital and four weeks as an outpatient. She received four spinal taps; they took out bone marrow and replaced it with chemo. Ideally you should lay flat for twenty-four hours after a spinal tap, but as an outpatient that's impossible. She was so ill, the chemo made her vomit every day, and every day she had to receive more. Finally the doctor stopped, because he said, it was killing her.

She got through the worst days through visualization and relaxation. Her friend Kelly gave her listening tapes and books when she first entered the hospital saying, "You may not need these right now, but maybe in the future."

"Three weeks later, bored, I turned these tapes on," Lisa said, "and they helped immensely. Learning the technique got me through some really hard times."

Through these tapes she whisked herself off to Buck Island in the Caribbean, a place she had gone four years previously with a group of co-workers. It took awhile to master the skill, but once she got comfortable with mentally going there she put her husband Dave into the picture. They lazed in the sun, floated in the crystal blue water, drank, ate and had fun. They went on a catamaran to an underwater provincial park, exploring beautiful fish and coral reefs. She spent hours there in her mind, away from the reality of her life. Then as a surprise, for her fortieth birthday, Dave took her off to Buck Island and together they relived her fantasy.

Lisa doesn't take her recovery for granted. She knows it took a community to help keep her alive. To celebrate her life she threw a party to mark her third year anniversary. Her elegant roomy house was packed with people from all stages of her life, including her hematologist. She threw another party to celebrate her ten year anniversary to thank everyone who participated in her success. There were over one hundred people. The air was alive with her humility and appreciation. It was a happy occasion.

To give back to society for her gift of life, Lisa volunteered at the Leukemia Research Fund, eventually becoming the President. She also worked for 5 years at the Canadian Cancer Society (CCS), managing the Diamond Ball Gala. She is a living example of the CCS's company motto – Cancer can be beaten!