

Family Counts

When the doctor gives you dire news, your life flashes before your eyes. In a matter of nanoseconds, the life you led and the life you expect, both form pictures in your mind. During that snippet of time, your faith, your family and your friends come full face. They will remain there as you deal with the consequences.

So was the case with Joe P. Marelle, the Athletic Director, Boys Basketball Coach and Department Chair for Health and Physical Education at Duluth High School in Duluth, GA. He had already gone through a bout with non-Hodgkins lymphoma. As Joe told his family, it was a good news, bad news story. The good news was that the lymphoma was in remission. The bad news was that he had acute leukemia. The family was devastated by the news. But, that family proved to be his biggest ally in his struggle. His wife Kathy, oldest son Joey, daughter Mary Pat and youngest son Tony rallied around him with a ring of love, compassion and strength that would prove uncharacteristically beneficial.

Dr. Tony Landis and the staff at Suburban Hematology and Northside Oncology started treating Joe right away. They had been down this road before with other patients but few with the determination and family support of Joe Marelle. Joe needed a bone marrow transplant. The transplants are onerous episodes but can provide a cure for leukemia if everything works in concert. One of the things that needs to work is finding a bone marrow donor. There is an international registry of those willing to donate and the samples are tested for 10 different "markers". A perfect match is needed to give a higher degree of success. When Joe's sample was compared to the registry, more bad news was delivered that there was no match found.

Undaunted by the news, Joe's doctors started checking for clinical trials around the country that might provide some treatment for his condition. Fortunately, an experimental bone marrow transplant procedure was being conducted at Johns Hopkins University hospital in Baltimore, MD. It was called a mini-haplotype bone marrow transplant and involved transplanting bone marrow from a donor of less than a perfect match. And so he did with continued help from his family. You see, though he refuses to wear a halo, it was Joey, his son, who provided the bone marrow for transplant. Joey, a college football player at West Georgia College volunteered to be the donor. It's unusual that a child's and a parent's DNA would be so compatible as the child is only half of the DNA of the parent. The other half is the other parent. Nonetheless, Joey's marrow was deemed acceptable for the procedure, the family rallied around and Joe prepared for the procedure.

But bad news continued to rear its ugly head when just a week before his scheduled transplant, Joe received an e-mail advising him that he was being relieved of his Athletic Director, coaching and Department Chairmanship duties with Duluth High School. Who could blame them? He would have been away from work at least 6 months and his likelihood of survival, much less full

recovery was less than certain. At this time, with this trip and procedure facing him, Joe could have given up, but despite this news and the devastation the loss of income and benefits would create, he persevered.

Fortunately, Joe's was the first case in Georgia for transplant with this experimental procedure approved by his insurance company. So Joe, no longer the head coach had to come to a realization. If he was going to continue to play in the game of life, he had to relinquish control to the real Head Coach, God. And so he did. Joe eventually recovered from the onerous procedure and, that year, Joe's son, Joey, attested, "It's the best Christmas present I will ever have".

Transplants are not simple surgeries. As the body acclimates to the new marrow, complications can set in as the marrow and the body coalesce. If the balance between the two gets off kilter, the recipient can become very ill or die. For this reason, during the adjustment period, numerous medications are provided to keep it all in balance. The patient is in a compromised position during this time and needs constant supervision and help. Having lost most of his income, it was incumbent upon Kathy to maintain some sense of normalcy for the family and that left Joe to go to Baltimore for the transplant. As hard as they may try, hospital personnel are insufficient to address all the needs of transplant patients following the procedure. But Joe was blessed with another angel. His friend and neighbor, Eric Hanada, volunteered to be Joe's caregiver. For almost six months, forsaking his family, his job and, basically, his own life as he knew it, Eric traveled with Joe to Baltimore and provided the care that Joe so desperately needed during his recovery. It was a sacrifice that few would make for a family member, much less a friend, but Eric's love for Joe was so uncharacteristically complete, that he unselfishly made that sacrifice to nurse Joe back to health so that he could come home when doctors gave clearance to do so.

Once home, post-transplant, struggling to recover, Joe needed and wanted to work and so he accepted the Head High School Basketball Coaching job at Mt. Pisgah Christian School in Alpharetta, GA. Mt. Pisgah Christian was only in its third year as a varsity basketball program. Joe had taken the job in mid-July and was dealing with basically the same team as the last year with the exception of a transfer student by the name of Tony Marelle.

You see, Tony, Joe's youngest son, in his junior year at Peachtree Ridge High School, recognizing his dad's condition and his dad's dedication to the basketball program at Mt. Pisgah left his friends and teammates and transferred to Mt. Pisgah to be with his dad and play basketball for him as Joe continued to coach and teach despite his continued treatments in the struggle to attain a complete recovery.

Joe coached that team to a 21-1 record and Mt. Pisgah Christian School landed in the Georgia Independent School Association Class AAA state finals for basketball. Tony took a leadership role on the team of unfamiliar players to achieve a synergy that proved compelling for all they faced. When the last buzzer sounded, Mt. Pisgah was the state champion. Through the crowd of well-wishers and rushing students who were trying to get to the coach, Tony

persevered to find his head coach and dad to hug and celebrate a victory that beat all odds. Joe seemed to be making a habit of beating the odds.

Today, thanks to his transplant and the love of family and friends, Joe continues to teach Health Science but he has a slightly different view. "I can give people honest facts when it comes to certain subjects, such as cancer" Joe says "Years ago, people said 'cancer' and immediately thought 'death penalty'. I hope people understand that the quality of life for people with cancer has changed and that they can help other people".

The gym at Duluth High School is named after Coach Joe Marelle, but despite the honor, he seems more attuned to what he finds important in life. "I told people years ago, 'Yeah, I've got cancer but that does not affect my heart and has not affected my mind. So long as my mind and my heart are in the right place, I can be a productive human being'".

Joe persevered through some of the most difficult times anyone can face. He did it with his faith, his friends and, most of all, with his family. He has beaten the odds on the court of basketball and the court of life and continues, this day, to be extremely productive and help others.

Thanks, Joe.