

LOCAL

# Pulling for Polhemus

## Princeton woman starting to bounce back from life-changing illness

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Dec. 9, 2015



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PRINCETON — It's been four months since Jaime Russell-Polhemus returned home from undergoing a risky stem cell transplant procedure in hopes it would cure her rare, life-threatening autoimmune disease.

In that time, Polhemus has slowly but surely regained her strength and is now doing activities around her home that would have been impossible to do just months before.

As previously reported, Polhemus was diagnosed with Stiff Person Syndrome (SPS) in 2013.

Throughout the last couple years, Polhemus has been forced to live an isolated life to prevent painful spasms and muscle stiffness throughout her body, which were often triggered by noise, touch or emotional distress.

While there is no definitive cure for SPS, Polhemus came across information about the stem cell transplant procedure other patients with autoimmune diseases had undergone to cure their symptoms. Polhemus was referred to Dr. Richard Burt, who has been called an expert in the treatment of autoimmune conditions using stem cell transplant. Burt is based at Northwestern University in Chicago.

After one visit to Burt, Polhemus was chosen as one of his 10 case studies he planned to undergo this year using the stem cell transplant.

The last time the BCR reported on Polhemus' journey in July, she had been through her first round of chemotherapy to kill off the "bad cells" that carried the antibodies causing her SPS symptoms.

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She then had to take self injections of Neupogen new baby stem cells.

Polhemus then went through a day-long procedure to collect a million of her stem cells which were cleaned, pre

Following that step, Polhemus underwent "extreme" chemotherapy to destroy most of her cells and immune system. She had to



she was highly susceptible to illness and infections.

Polhemus said her perspective on what exactly happened during the short time period is a blur, but one thing she does remember is coming down with a horrible case of pancreatitis, which ended up being a rare side effect to the chemotherapy.

A modest Polhemus describes the event as being rough, but it ended up being a point in the procedure where Burt became troubled about her well being and future of recovery.

Polhemus, however, powered through in the days following and her "clean" stem cells, which had no memory of SPS, were able to be placed back into her body.

Today, she compares her roughest days to eating a sandwich.

"For me, you know going into it will be uncomfortable, and it's a sandwich you have to eat one bite at a time," she said. "Even though you may not like that sandwich, you know that with each bite you're getting closer to the end."

Even through the unknown moments in recovery, Polhemus continually focused on the positive matters, whether that was a card sent from someone back home or a personal Facebook message full of encouraging words or the small but meaningful acts the nurses did for her in the hospital.

"The time went fast. It was so intense, but I look back now and would do it again in a heartbeat," she said. "By far, my Stiff Person Syndrome over the last five years was much more extreme than going through the stem cell transplant."

Polhemus said she would recommend the procedure to anyone who is suffering from an autoimmune disease.

"The end result is I've been given a second chance with my boys and husband," she said.

Polhemus was able to return home on Aug. 9. Between then and today, she has been able to go outside and shoot a couple basketball hoops with her sons. She

also was able to help set up Christmas decorations outside the home. Polhemus said moments like those make her feel like she's making up for lost time with her family.

Before undergoing the procedure, Polhemus talked about feeling isolated from the things she loved most, such as listening to music or just hearing her boys' laughter, which are both things that would have triggered her spasms.

While she has experienced some small spasms since being home, she has been able to control them with a simple muscle relaxer. Before, a spasm attack would have sent her to the emergency room.

Doctors have told her that it could take up to a year before her body is fully in remission.

Polhemus is adamant in saying that without all the community support, she could not have done this procedure.

In the spring, the Polhemus family started a GoFundMe page that has since collected just over \$46,000 to help pay for the costly transplant and other medical or family expenses that arose during the time Polhemus was in the hospital.

Local businesses, organizations, schools, churches and many, many community members rallied around to help support the family this summer. Also, a fundraiser was held on Aug. 8 to help support the family.

"I have God to be thankful for, and the community to be thankful for, as well," Polhemus said. "It is the town that has helped us raise that money. Those things just release the tension and stress that come during these sort of times ... I don't know if people realize how much they have helped me.

"If you add it up, I would have never gotten my foot in the door without the community's support," she said.

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