



WEDNESDAY
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News (Home)
Sports
Weather
Entertainment
For Kids (Mostly)
Local Deaths
Special Editions
Past Issues

Next Story
Previous Story

Treatment For Lupus Has Proven Successful For Millersburg Woman

By **RHONDA ROSNER**
Millersburg Staff Writer

MILLERSBURG

A revolutionary medical procedure is bringing critically ill patients from death's doorstep to a new threshold of life.

Heather Markel and other young lupus survivors, recently interviewed on TV, say they are ecstatic about the "miracle" performed at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago.

In 1997, Markel, of 467 Walkup St., Millersburg, was the first American lupus patient to undergo a procedure that replaced her overactive immune system with new healthy cells generated by her own body. Two other patients received cell transplants about a year later.

All three remain in complete remission.

Sometimes happy tears flow down Markel's face when she recounts the events of the past couple years. "I can't believe this has happened," she said.

In 1997, specialists said it would take about five years of monitoring to determine the success of the procedure. It has been almost two years since Markel underwent the medical



HEATHER MARKEL says an experimental lupus treatment has given her her life back. *Rhonda Rosner photo*

treatment that has given her good health for the first time since she was 11 years old.

Markel no longer takes medication for lupus. It has been more than a year since she took her last dose of prednisone, which was a mainstay for 14 years since she was diagnosed. The drug was taken in quantities as high as 120 milligrams a day. The puffy "moon face" and weight gain from water retention has been replaced with cheekbones and a body so trim her own doctors could hardly recognize her.

The young woman who began to think of Akron Children's Hospital Medical Center as her second home, slipped into a coma for a week and missed three months of school in her freshman year in high school, is now living a very different life.

Instead of keeping five doctors' appointments a month, she went on a cruise. On May 6, she is returning to Belize where she will study medicine at the Central American Health Sciences University before going to Texas.

Recent housecleaning in the bedroom in her Millersburg home gave her gratification that went way beyond the satisfaction of tidying up. It was "exciting" because "I filled three basins full of drugs -- at least 30 bottles of different kinds of medication that I used to need -- and I threw it all out!"

Markel, who now is often told she looks younger than her 26 years, says, "I feel like a teenager. I feel like I'm going through my teens in my mid-20s, because of all the things I can do that I couldn't before. I can go out snorkeling or just walking. For the first time in 15 years, I don't have to worry about my health."

It's also the first time coming down with the sniffles is no cause for alarm. "I don't worry about going into the hospital. I had the flu about a month ago, and I knew I could get over it on my own," she says.

A reporter for WGN in Chicago, in a recent interview with Markel, described her as "near death" two years ago. Out of control blood pressure and the threat of kidney failure made the critically ill Millersburg woman a good candidate for the experimental stem cell transplant that took place April 9, 1997.

This April, Markel returned to Northwestern Hospital for a second year review during which about 50 tubes of blood

were drawn. No sign of lupus was discovered in any lab tests.

She will be examined and evaluated annually for three more years and probably will have tests on her blood for the rest of her life. But doctors at Northwestern Hospital are optimistic.

In a recently taped interview, doctors at Northwestern stopped short of calling it a cure, but Dr. Ann Traynor, current transplant director, said "it feels like a miracle to see our patients' happy, healthy faces."

Markel plans to hold a reunion every year with "fellow transplants" Elizabeth Maun, who is studying to be a nurse, and Bryan Akers, who is taking paramedics training.