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Jerry Brewer

A prayer for Gloria: Coach's daughter fights cancer

By **Jerry Brewer**

Seattle Times staff columnist

The coach's daughter lives to entertain. She often asks her mother how an 11-year-old can become an actress. She combs through her closet, pieces together the most extraordinary outfits and tells her sisters, "This is what people in Hollywood are wearing."

Gloria **Strauss** sings and dances, too. She mastered all of Michael Jackson's pet moves during one extended hospital stay four years ago. Cancer is not going to reduce her to an opening act. Four years later, as doctors forecast her life dripping to its final weeks, she is still performing, planning song selections in case she makes it on "American Idol."

"One of them definitely would have to be 'I Feel Like A Woman,' " the coach's daughter says before softly singing the chorus of Shania Twain's song.

"Another one goes, 'Let's give them something to talk about,' " she croons.

"Livin' La Vida Loca" would be another, she says.

Children and their dreams.

"I don't know if it'll happen down my line," Gloria says, "but I hope it does."

In the **Strauss** home in Federal Way, family and friends gather nightly now to pray for such hopes.

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STEVE RINGMAN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Kennedy High boys basketball coach Doug **Strauss**, right, and his wife Kristen, left, lay hands on daughter Gloria during a nightly prayer session for their child. Friends have been showing up each night in greater numbers to support Gloria, who has a form of cancer called neuroblastoma.

They anticipate one day seeing Gloria, the star, just like they envision her father leading the Kennedy High School boys basketball team to the state tournament.

Doug **Strauss** looks down at a prayer card and then scans his den. On this night, about 40 people have packed the room. He nods at his wife, Kristen, who is holding their 7-month-old son, Vincent. Daily injections of Copaxone make it impossible to notice Kristen has suffered from multiple sclerosis for six years. Then Doug does inventory of his five other children: Alissa, 13; Maria, 9; Joe, 6; Anthony, 5; and Sam, 3.

Finally, he runs his hand through Gloria's blonde hair and announces that, before reciting the Rosary, Kennedy High freshman Lisa Tran is here to play a song on the piano.

She entitled the piece "A Prayer for Gloria."

The diagnosis

Gloria discovered she had cancer at age 7. Neuroblastoma, doctors called it. Children are typically diagnosed before turning 5. When Gloria's neuroblastoma was detected, her condition was already at an advanced Stage 4.

She had a stem-cell transplant that did not work. She has tried three experimental drugs. But the cancer will not die. It hibernates and attacks, hibernates and attacks. It creeps through her liver, lymph nodes, bone marrow and various spots throughout her body.

Two weeks ago, she was told she might live only a few more weeks.

"She absolutely needs a miracle," Doug says. "I don't like to say I worry about her dying, but I do."

Gloria clearly remembers the day she was given a timeline. Gloria glanced at her father. She could see the news on his face.

In early February, Gloria found out her cancer was spreading again. She tried a new treatment, an antibody with a chemotherapy agent. Each dose required her to stay in the hospital for several days, but then she could come home. She was fine with this medicine. It was not draining her as much as she thought.

It was not fending off neuroblastoma, either.

"When I found out the cancer spread even more, I was so disappointed," Gloria said. "I thought, 'You mean, we're not going to just go to the hospital and watch movies and eat popcorn anymore?'"

"The first three days, I cried forever, and so did my parents. It was weird because I hardly see my dad cry."

The **Strauss** family does not soak in tears too much. They lean on their Catholic faith and pray for strength. When Gloria learned of her illness, Doug told his kin, "I'm declaring a breakthrough for our family."

He is waiting for the miracle, but he can see some evidence of this breakthrough: stronger faith, more united family, friends galore showing their unselfishness.

T-shirts that read "Glorified by Gloria" soothe their angst. They stand amazed as friends donate

More about Gloria

- If you would like to help Gloria **Strauss** financially, donations can be made at any Washington Mutual bank. Ask to contribute to The Gloria **Strauss** Benevolent Fund.

- Lisa Tran's song "A Prayer for Gloria" can be viewed at YouTube.com. Enter "A Prayer for Gloria" in the search box.

- Columnist Jerry Brewer and photographer Steve Ringman are documenting the **Strauss** family story. A series on their journey will appear in June.

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money and food and offer to do household chores. They say they have seen God's heart through this experience.

"The dirt in our story is as good as the flowers," Doug says. "The dirt produced the flowers. That's a good one, don't you think so?"

"My wife would say the flowers are roses. And I'd say dahlias."

The decision

There is a debate in the **Strauss** house. It is about Gloria's future college. Mom throws out Notre Dame, a school her side of the family adores. Dad suggests Washington, the hometown school. Gloria wants to be closer to Hollywood.

"I always think to myself, 'If I go to Notre Dame and get married, then I'll probably live in South Bend, Ind., my whole life,' " says Gloria, who has many relatives residing in Indiana. "I want to go to school in California and get an acting degree."

Then she deadpans with a comedian's skill.

"I don't know too much about college," Gloria says, "but my parents say I've got a few days to figure it out."

This girl, running low on time? She is beautiful. Cute runs in the **Strauss** family. Doug brags that he and Kristen are 7 for 7 in the production of adorable. Gloria looks like the child actor she aspires to be. One well-timed grin, and she can hide her struggles from anyone, including her parents.

Doug plugs his video recorder into the television. You have to see this, he says. This is Gloria, the model.

On the video, Doug is taping Gloria while aiming a hair dryer at her face. She wants to imitate a model whose hair is blowing in the wind. She ignores the dryer's heat. She has the stare. She has the puckered lips. She has the poses.

If not for her moments of pain, no one would notice Gloria is sick. But she is taking seven to nine pain pills a day now.

"That's the part that sucks," Doug says. "That's the part I can't stand. The medicine is not going to reverse that. It's cancer. It's cancer growing. It's not a sprained ankle. It's not an injury. It's cancer."

Gloria must soon decide whether to try another aggressive cancer treatment or to just take her chances. She is torn, and so are her parents.

"I'm afraid to do something because I don't want to beat my body up with the medicine and not beat the cancer," Gloria says. "And I'm afraid to do nothing and just let the cancer grow."

On Monday, the family is taking a four-day trip to Ocean Shores. They are all together now. No work. No school. Just enjoying each other. Maybe an answer will come while they are away.

In the meantime, Gloria anticipates a vacation of go-kart riding, swimming and watching movies. If she is lucky, she hopes to ride a horse, too. She has never done that.

The family

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Doug and Kristen **Strauss** laugh and call themselves old school. They are classic high-school sweethearts. They started dating during their senior year at Kennedy in Burien and never stopped. Class of 1992. Only 15 years ago. Now Doug is 32, Kristen is 33, and they have seven children.

"A lot of people are like, 'Gosh, that many kids! Why?' " Doug says. "We're so open to life. People think you just can't have that many kids in this day and age and make it work. Oh yeah? Watch."

Through financial troubles, through MS, through cancer, Doug and Kristen remain the same. Last week, on Kristen's birthday, Doug looked at his wife and asked what gift she really wanted. Kristen grinned shyly and said she could use a pedicure. Doug smiled back like a detective about to solve a case.

The **Strauss** family specializes in simple living. With nine people dwelling together, entertainment can be a night at home. They live in constant noise, usually chipper chatter. Sam is singing and dancing. Joe and Anthony are fighting for attention. Alissa, the oldest, the leader with a mother-like way, is trying to quiet some of the ruckus. Maria is happily meandering between her two existences: older sister to the four boys, baby girl to her two sisters.

And there is Gloria, the oldest 11-year-old ever, resting on the couch.

"I don't worry so much about my friends with this," she says. "But I do with my family."

She worries her siblings will grow jealous of the attention she receives. Kids fight, and these children are no different. Sometimes, Gloria fears they think she is spoiled.

"It breaks my heart," she says. "I didn't ask for cancer. People are just being kind."

Sometimes, her mind shifts to all the schoolwork she is missing. You can catch up, her parents tell her. She knows that, but she cannot help thinking of all the summer work catching up will require, all the weekends lost.

Too often, her life runs opposite of her friends' lives. When they are in school, she is in the hospital. When they are out of school, she is sifting through stacks of papers.

"I have so much in my binder," Gloria says. "It's completely filled. I can't accept that. I know that when I'm feeling better, sooner or later, I have to go back to school and catch up. It's really not fair. Because of cancer, I have to spend my whole summer to catch up."

"It just annoys me."

The hope

Days before Gloria initially was diagnosed with cancer, Kristen heard God talking to her. Four years later, the message stays with her.

"I felt God said this will be an incurable cancer," Kristen says. "He said, 'When I heal her, I will change the lives of many.' Every time I feel myself doubting, I get on my knees and pray again."

She believes the miracle will arrive in Gloria's most desperate hour, when the medicine is useless, when the fight is reduced to Gloria, the cancer and God.

She understands that time is now. She prays for her faith to remain.

"When I feel like people around me are doubting, I get frustrated," Kristen says. "I don't want negative

energy."

Near the end of three hours of worship one night, Doug and Kristen ask for a sign that their daughter is OK, that she is still strong, that she will make it. They make that request for about 30 minutes.

"We need a sign, Lord," Doug says. "We need a sign."

As a math and Spanish teacher, as a coach, Doug wills kids to do as he wishes. He always figures a stern look or some quick wit or some encouragement will help. Those methods do not work now. He prays for patience.

After saying goodbye to all who came to worship, Doug walks into Gloria's room.

"I'm sorry, Dad," Gloria says.

For what, he wonders.

"I was kind of stubborn today," she tells him.

They embrace.

"Can I come out?" she asks.

It is a quarter till midnight. She wants some time in the den with her parents.

While the three sit and reflect, Gloria stands. She had looked so tired earlier, but not anymore. A true star knows when it is showtime.

She laughs and dances.

She sings Shania Twain once more.

"Man!" she croons in her best country voice. "I feel like a woman!"

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