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"I'm going to make it"

By **Jerry Brewer**
Seattle Times staff columnist

Gloria **Strauss** is ready for her miracle. God will heal her. Mom said so.

The 11-year-old has spent four years dueling with cancer. Seven bouts of chemotherapy. A stem-cell transplant. Radiation. Experimental drugs that belong in a spelling bee: fenretinide, cefixime, irinotecan and temozolomide. Still, the disease slithers on, impervious. Neuroblastoma, this rare and vexing childhood illness, rests in her liver, lymph nodes, bones and bone marrow. In late April, Gloria learned her life could be ticking to its final weeks. Enough, Gloria and her parents say. No more cancer treatments.

Let go. Let God.

Drop her so she can be caught.

Gloria does not want chemo to batter her body or destroy her blond hair again. She has been relying on drugs with no history of healing, so it is time to abandon cancer medicine.

"This is it," says her mother, Kristen. "I always knew it would come to this."

When the parents tell Gloria's doctor of their decision, they try to explain it. They do not want

A prayer for Gloria

◀ PREV 1 of 6 NEXT ▶



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STEVE RINGMAN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Dealing with life's wrinkles

Gloria **Strauss** straightens a crease on her sister Maria's bedspread while holding her baby brother, Vincent, at their Federal Way home. Gloria is very particular about keeping their room neat. On the sign above her bed is her nickname — Glow.

this choice confused with complacency. As the mother pauses to untangle her words, Dr. Julie Park speaks.

"That's just it, Kristen," she says. "You're not just doing nothing. You're doing something."

The doctor is talking quality of life. Kristen and her husband, Doug, are talking divine intervention.

It all goes back to the day Kristen believes God spoke to her. Before the diagnosis, he told her Gloria would have an incurable disease. She says he left her with this: "When I heal her, I will change the lives of many."

Kristen does not doubt. She cannot doubt. Every time she starts to waver, she experiences a reaffirming moment. Once, she wondered about that healing promise. She thought, "Am I making this up?" She prayed for an answer. A Scripture, Matthew 10, popped into her head.

"Matthew 11?" she asked, testing herself.

No, Matthew 10, a voice said. She fetched her Bible, grandma's old one, a cherished gift. After she flipped to the right page, she was stunned.

Before her grandmother, Mary Louise Miller, died nine years ago, she had underlined three verses: Matthew 10:1 and 7-8. As Kristen read, she realized this Scripture was about healing.

1 Then he summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority to expel unclean spirits and to cure sickness and disease of every kind.

7 As you go, make this announcement: 'The reign of God is at hand!'

8 Cure the sick, raise the dead, heal the leprous, expel the demons. The gift you have received, give as a gift.

Kristen shows her grandma's underlined Bible and flips the pages in her journal until she finds her recollections of that morning.

"There were times when I was nervous about claiming the miracle," Kristen says. "And I thought, 'Why am I nervous? What do I have to lose?' "

Six years ago, Kristen discovered she had multiple sclerosis. After two debilitating eruptions in her central nervous system, the MS now sleeps. It has been quiet for nearly five years. Her doctor, Jeffrey



As Gloria Strauss' medical options run out, her family is relying on a miracle from God. Meanwhile, the 11-year-old cancer patient remains certain:

“ I'm going to make it. ”

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Dunn, looks at her and gives faith almost as much credit as those nightly injections of Copaxone.

Says her husband, Doug: "It's hard to honor a half-hearted faith. We're told to pray boldly. A lot of times people don't do that. We do."

To get to their Federal Way home, Doug says, look for the gorgeous gated house.

"Do you see it?" he asks, and after an affirmative answer he turns jokester. "It's pretty, huh? OK, that's not our house."

Turn at the gorgeous gated house. Follow the gravel road. The path curves to the left, leading to a one-story white residence. Two-foot statues of St. Francis of Assisi and Mary sit in the yard. Kristen was raised a devout Catholic. Doug was baptized during his junior year at Kennedy High School, a Catholic institution in Burien.

During their senior year at Kennedy, Doug and Kristen began dating. After his first night out with Kristen, Doug came home and told his mother, "This is the kind of girl I want to marry."

Adulthood came so quickly. They graduated in June 1992. They had their first child, Alissa, on Jan. 23, 1994. They married on July 30, 1994.

Thirteen years later, Doug and Kristen credit those six months between Alissa's birth and their wedding for making their relationship sturdy.

They were 19 and living together at the time. Doug had proposed to Kristen the previous Christmas, but friends and family urged the couple to live apart before their wedding. They cited high divorce rates. They cited rigid religious beliefs. They told them it is never too late to do the right thing.

After much thought, Doug and Kristen made a pact to "start over." Doug stayed at their apartment. Kristen moved back to her parents' house with Alissa. They saw each other daily, but they lived separately for five months. They were abstinent for five months, too.

"It was the best thing we ever did," Kristen says.

He and Kristen have seven children now. Dad is a math and Spanish teacher who coaches the boys basketball team at his alma mater. Mom is a homemaker.

Doug wants people to see the Strausses for who they are: human but humane and always trying to get better. They are as open as their perpetually ajar door. With nine people living together, the door rarely closes. Look inside, he says.

"We want this story to be heard," Doug says. "We don't mind being 'naked.' We're definitely not perfect, but there are so many families who don't realize how simple life can be."

Gloria slides out of bed one May night and shuffles into a room of praying adults. She listens closely. These requests do not refer to her or the deep pain her cancer causes. They are about Jennifer Vertetis, her mother's lifelong friend, who has an autistic 7-year-old son.

Gloria nestles next to Jennifer, rests her head on the woman's hand and joins the worship. Eyes closed, Jennifer cannot see her, but she knows it is Gloria. She just knows. A month later, Jennifer still marvels at Gloria's compassion.

"Here's this little girl, in more pain than anyone knows, in total peace, praying for me," Vertetis says. "It was the most beautiful thing."

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Peace. Everyone who enters the **Strauss** home uses that word now. Total peace. For a family so large, serenity has a higher volume level, but the children roam about, unfettered.

Alissa, 13, the oldest child, sits on the deck and relives her school dance. In the background, three of her siblings — Maria, 9; Joe, 6; and Anthony, 5; bounce on a trampoline. Sam, 3, wanders outside and starts untying shoestrings.

Meanwhile, Gloria sleeps inside. Mom feeds 8-month-old Vincent. Dad rustles around, searching for the croquet set. "When you walk into that house, you believe," Vertetis says. "You have to believe. In this miracle, in everything. I don't know what it is. You see all these beautiful kids and that beautiful girl, and you have to believe."

Somehow, the spirit has not changed over time, friends say. It existed long before a soccer ball hit Gloria in the face four years ago and left a persistent black eye that first signaled trouble. It remains today, impervious.

Late one night, Alissa finds Gloria sobbing before a mirror.

"Are you OK?" Alissa asks.

"Am I crying?" Gloria replies. "I look like I'm crying, right?"

"Yes. Are you OK?"

"Yeah. I just did such a good job making myself cry."

The girls giggle. It is just Gloria, an aspiring entertainer, honing her acting skills once more. When Gloria smiles, her cheeks seize her face. They rise so high they make her squint and conceal her wide, blue eyes. Her parents nicknamed her Tweety Bird because of those big eyes. Gloria sleeps while her parents reminisce. She naps a lot, one effect of taking so many potent painkillers. She averages about nine pills a day, but lately, she has not asked for as much medication. In surprising spurts, she has energy her parents have not seen in years. They wonder about the miracle.

"Is this God healing her right now?" Kristen asks. "You can't help but think it. But then you have to realize the pain medicine she's taking. But then, we don't know for certain how this miracle will come."

Kristen figures it will arrive during a desperate time, when the hourglass is low on sand. Gloria says, "I just have this feeling things will get worse before they get better."

They do not know for sure. They walk wearing blindfolds, trusting they will not run into a wall. Or trusting the wall will disappear. They believe this much: There was a purpose behind Gloria's illness. She was afflicted with cancer to bring people closer to God.

"Just the whole idea that people are praying over me really moves me," Gloria says. "I think, because people care so much, they've changed. People are always saying they're praying for me. Who knew my being sick could make a difference?"

Neuroblastoma is harshest at the end. It has the closing speed of a champion Thoroughbred. The cancer lingers in a child's body, weakening it over time, and later it makes a dramatic rush. When it overtakes organs, children die.

Gloria's cancer has grown slower than in most patients. After an unsuccessful stem-cell transplant in 2003, Gloria was given anywhere from three months to three years to live. She passed the three-year mark seven months ago. Her neuroblastoma naps a lot. This is rare, Park says.

As a doctor, Park cannot rely on religion over medicine, but she thinks the **Strauss** family's spirituality — most importantly, the calmness and optimism it creates — helps fight the disease.

"I have no intention to take away their hope for a miracle or how they believe a miracle will come about," Park says. "I think my job is to make sure they're grounded. And they are. Every family of a child dealing with an illness wants a miracle. Others don't have it as crystallized as this one."

In April, before the family made a decision, a team of doctors presented the Strausses with three medical options for Gloria. All involved significant doses of chemotherapy and lots of hospital time. One treatment would have made her blond hair fall out. None could guarantee a healing.

So the family opted against further treatment. Park now closely monitors Gloria's pain and other symptoms. Gloria visits the hospital roughly every two weeks, greeting Park with the same zest and inquisitive mind the oncologist has always admired.

"Kids, they don't want to be sick," Park says. "They don't want to act sick. They don't want to look sick. It helps us keep our focus in the right place. We are very humbled by how far we have to go to cure all the kids."

Every case is so confounding. Kari Mannikko knows. She volunteers in child care at St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church, where she sometimes baby-sits the **Strauss** boys.

Her son, Brandon, died of neuroblastoma eight years ago. He was 4.

Whenever Doug and Kristen hold prayer services at their home, Kari is compelled to come. Of all the visitors, she has the most reason to doubt the miracle. But she does not.

"I just feel it deep inside," Kari says. "Gloria has an opportunity to be different. She doesn't have to have the path we went through.

"I don't think this is where her road's going to end. I don't think this is her time. I know what the prognosis is. I've been there. But I don't think this is it."

Kari remembers the day she knew Brandon would die. As she moistened his mouth with a swab, she looked down his throat and observed what she believed were tumors. Enough, she thought. She told her little boy, "If you feel God calling you, it's OK."

Two nights later, Kari noticed her child's breathing had changed. She awoke her husband, Brian, and asked him not to go to work in the morning.

They rose from bed, spread Brandon across their laps and held him until he passed several hours later.

Before prayer one night, Doug thanks Kari for coming. Later, they have a moving conversation.

Kari is in awe of the support Doug's family has. Doug appreciates the woman's kindness. Kari considers it Brandon's gift to her, this compassion. They talk until their eyelids droop.

"I used to think of this disease like the ocean," Kari says later. "It's quiet, and then big, roaring waves come, and your feet are sucked out from underneath you in a heartbeat. We try to get our minds around it, but it's so much bigger than what we know."

She finds only one other notion so vast.

Faith.

"We're blending our strength," Kari says. "We're praying for that strength to be used in this family and that this is the time for God to intervene."

"The most powerful thing is that we just don't know. And that's what you have to hang onto."

Members of the **Strauss** family have a belief but no road map and no timeline. They have no idea how Gloria's healing will be packaged. Could God work through a doctor? If so, are they making the proper choices with medicine? They are open to adjusting their game plan with medicine. As a coach, Doug makes adjustments all the time.

But what if God's plans change, too?

"Then he will equip us for whatever else it is," Kristen says. "I'm not worried about that."

With matching smiles, Doug and Kristen recall the first time they felt powerless to help Gloria. They watched her fall 10 feet. While her father was coaching a basketball game, Gloria slipped through a gap in the bleachers' railing and plunged. She was 3. The thud of child hitting concrete stopped the game.

In the ambulance, the parents comforted their daughter as best they could. Doug told Gloria he would buy her ice cream. Gloria relaxed. After being treated for a concussion, she made sure daddy remembered that ice cream.

Lately, the parents find themselves telling this story more often.

Eight years ago, it was so unnerving to watch Gloria falling. She is falling again now, only from much higher than 10 feet, but Doug and Kristen watch in peace.

Let go. Let God.

"I hope people get that it's going to be a miracle, and I'm going to make it," Gloria says. "A lot of the time, people will cry and go, 'I really hope.' I know for a fact I'm going to make it. I'm really sure about that."

"I feel like people, throughout this whole thing, have been inspired by me. I know some people who have almost become Catholic because of this."

"Maybe if people are worried for me or afraid, I really want them to pray about it and think to themselves, 'She's an amazing young girl, and I don't see why on Earth she'd leave.' "

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