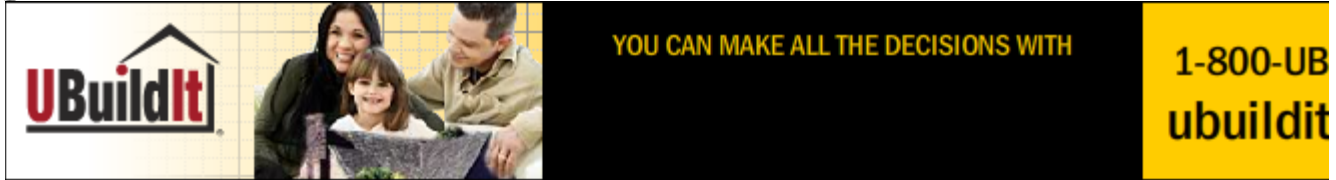


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ADV If all goes well, she'll never break a bone 

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## "You know I've been down. ... Forgive me."

By **Jerry Brewer**  
Seattle Times staff columnist

She is not going. No way. More than anything, Gloria Strauss wants control right now, and because she cannot govern her cancer, she settles for ruling her social calendar.

When her parents ask if she wishes to attend a prayer session at the Fantozzis' house, Gloria responds with a word she never used to say: "No." She is tired. She is angry. She is dejected. The cancer has spread to Gloria's spirit.

"It's never been like this before," says her mother, Kristen Strauss. "It's always been hard, but it's never been like this."

### Suffering with grace

For four years, the 11-year-old has been a patient and a symbol, suffering with grace and galvanizing a community into action. The support is immense and mesmerizing, hundreds unifying to help this family with seven children. Hundreds seeing their religious beliefs manifested in this girl. Hundreds believing what Gloria believes: Instead of a medical breakthrough for her terminal illness, God will heal her.

A legally blind man once requested to meet with Gloria. Near the end of their visit, he pulled the adults aside and declared,

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STEVE RINGMAN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Facing life's twists and turns A new wheelchair's arrival at the Strauss household means fun for Anthony, who gives Gloria and Vincent a spin. But the chair portends difficult days ahead.

"I think you've been told that I'm not a seeing man. But I can see Gloria. She's light."

People adore her. Sometimes, they lionize her. They wear T-shirts that read "Glorified by Gloria."

This community is actually a cluster of communities. Most are Catholic but not all. There are the parents, students and teachers at Kennedy High School in Burien, where Gloria's father, Doug Strauss, teaches and coaches basketball. There are those connected to St. Philomena Catholic School in Des Moines, where the Strauss kids get their education. There are church families from St. Vincent de Paul and St. Theresa in Federal Way.

And then there are more family friends, friends of family friends, and aid that extends to South Bend, Ind., where Kristen's parents and many of her relatives reside.

"If we didn't have that support, I don't think our family would be as strong," says Alissa, 13, the oldest of the Strauss children.

The family calls its helpers "little angels." They bring food, do laundry, assist with house cleaning and baby-sit. They offer money, vacation homes, their shoulders, their ears and prayer — lots of prayer.

It has been nearly three months since Dr. Julie Park, an oncologist at Children's Hospital & Regional Medical Center, told the family that neuroblastoma is overtaking Gloria. She has lived three times longer than the bleakest scenario of one month.

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Her reward: more pain. Gloria's left leg gets as stiff as a baseball bat at times. Doug massaged his daughter recently and felt tumors.

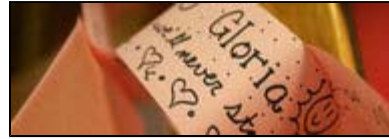
"When we pray for Gloria, it's like we're the ones receiving the blessings," says Mary Caldwell, a family friend. "We're receiving the healing. It's very humbling. It's been life-changing for all of us. But more than anything, we want to see Gloria full of life.

"It's a miracle already. But we want to see her miracle."

### An impossible situation

Last month, some friends gave the family backstage passes to see "West Side Story" at the 5th Avenue Theatre. Everyone could not sit together during the musical, and a few minutes before the

A prayer for Gloria



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.”

Reporter's journal | Follow Jerry Brewer as he talks about covering Gloria

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Archive | A prayer for Gloria: Coach's daughter fights cancer

Gloria's school site

Strauss family blog

Lisa Tran's song "A Prayer for Gloria" on YouTube

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intermission, Kristen sent a text message to her husband. Gloria needed more pain medicine.

Doug ran to the car during the break. Gloria and her grandmother, Diane Strauss, went to the restroom. It required walking down some steps, and on the journey back up, Gloria put all her weight on Grandma's right shoulder. Diane asked if Gloria wanted to wait for her father to return, so he could carry her up the stairs. Gloria said no and grimaced her way back to the theater lobby.

After the show, while driving home alone, Diane cried.

Those who see Gloria regularly conceal their pain, break down in private, cobble themselves back together and return to doing whatever they can to help.

"No matter what we do, it can't change the fact that watching your child suffer is unbearable," says Tedd Caldwell, Mary's husband. "It seems like an impossible situation sometimes."

A hospice group called Stepping Stones assists the Strauss family now. Gloria and her two sisters, Alissa and Maria, receive counseling. The parents are in couples counseling to make sure they are communicating properly. But this dilemma still has them cornered.

Then the bills arrive. Doug admits that "even if there was no cancer, money would be tight." He tries to support nine people on a teacher's salary. He needs help, and sometimes he must ask for it.

Doug refers often to "giving up his righteousness" — in other words, swallowing his pride. His humility can be traced to when he worked at Pike Place Fish Market, where he gained perspective swapping tales with his co-workers.

Doug haggles with hospitals and insurance companies over medical costs, but so far, he has found ways to be covered. The family wallet bleeds from spending more than \$300 a month on gas to transport Gloria and the kids. Kristen also needs regular checkups to monitor her multiple sclerosis.

A hectic schedule forces the family to eat out more, a big no-no during normal times. Money disappears so easily.

"In our family, everything starts with humor," Doug says. "Nothing is off limits. The phone company calls asking about payments, and I'll go, 'Come on, man. My wife has MS!' "

Kristen slaps her husband's arm. Doug gives her a goofy look, and they laugh together.

### Running low on solutions

Gloria takes a mixture of methadone and oxycodone to treat her pain. She tried wearing a pain patch. It did not work. She tried wearing two pain patches. They did not work. She has a wheelchair for whenever her legs ache too much for her to walk.

A prescription for Prozac, the powerful antidepressant, rests in her parents' hands. They hope not to fill it, but they are running low on solutions.

Doug asks one more time about going to the Fantozzis.

"No," Gloria says again. "I'm not going."

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## Seeing "the goodness of God"

When the Strausses went to Ocean Shores in May, they returned to a refurbished home. Friends cleaned the yard, cleaned the house, painted the house, added fresh pictures, bought a new trampoline and installed fresh carpet.

"I've never seen anything like it," said Kelley Masterson, who helped with the home makeover. "Up close, it's hallowed ground. I can't believe we did so much work. God was transforming the ordinary to the extraordinary."

When Kristen's parents, Pat and Vicki Trimberger, wanted the family to visit, a friend of the Trimbergers donated his private jet to fly the family to South Bend.

When Doug was feeling the need for money last month, a fellow high-school basketball coach knocked on his door. Steve Kramer, the Eastside Catholic boys coach, told Doug the school's boys and girls teams held a free-throw-athon for Gloria. Then he handed him a check. The two coaches had never met before.

Doug's eyes widened as he looked at the check.

"Either the zero is in the wrong place or that's \$20,000!" he exclaimed.

After sharing hugs with Kramer and three others from the school, they all prayed together.

Doug and Kristen say they see "the goodness of God" daily. Sometimes, the gifts are smaller. They are still just as meaningful.

"If it takes a village to raise a child, how much does it take to raise seven of them?" asks Jason Prouty, Doug's top assistant coach at Kennedy. "Doug's a teacher. He's devoted his life to other people. If I've got a little extra wiggle room, I'm always asking, 'What can I do?' "

Marilyn Porter has picked up the Strauss kids for school since Alissa was in kindergarten. Porter's son, Porter Fernandez, is the same age as Alissa, so it was only natural that they car pool to St. Philomena.

Now the Strauss family has five children in school. Porter bought a bigger car.

"They touch my heart," she says, crying. "They're just such an inspiring family. Some families have trouble with one kid. They get a lot from people right now, but they never act like they do. They're not spoiled."

## "Haven't we had enough?"

Three weeks ago, while at Wild Waves Water Park in Federal Way, someone broke into the family's van. The Strausses were robbed of money, credit cards, makeup, purses and even Kristen's breast pump for 8-month-old son Vincent. A cross was snapped in half. But even worse, Doug's precious video recorder and years of family recordings were stolen.

Doug had taped most every significant family moment and documented Gloria's journey. Kristen had the videos in the van because a friend was going to burn them onto DVDs for backup.

Now, they just have memories.

The Strausses have done interviews with other local media outlets, hoping someone might be compassionate enough to return their videos. They have requested that the stolen tapes be left at St. Vincent — no questions asked. They have tried to cajole police into solving this crime more quickly. No luck.

"The night of the theft, I wanted to videotape the moon," Doug says. "Then I thought, 'Oh my gosh! My camera!' I cried, man. I was heartbroken. It caused a big ruckus in the house. The kids were asking, 'Why's this stuff got to keep happening to us? Haven't we had enough?' "

There are special prayer sessions for the Strausses five nights a week now. Monday at the D'Angelos' house. Tuesday at the Currans. Wednesday at the Fantozzis. Thursday at the Brennans. Friday at the Caldwells.

They pray for Gloria's pain to lessen. They pray for strength. They pray for the parents' leadership to remain strong. They pray for all the Strauss children. They pray for God's will.

They pray for the miracle.

"Oh my gosh, we've been filling up the heavens with prayer," Diane Strauss says.

Prayer nights are comforting, inspiring, but then reality mornings come. Every day, Gloria awakes in pain. Every day, she swallows pill after pill. Every day, she wanders deeper into a challenge as mental as it is physical.

"Gloria is amazing, but she is an 11-year-old girl," says Lori Rosellini, a friend who grew up with Kristen. "She believes, as strong as anybody, in the miracle. She knows she has all these people rooting for her. She has the mind and the spirit to keep up, but sometimes her body can't. And she doesn't want too many people to see her when she's down."

### **A sudden change of heart**

She is still not going. Gloria wants to suffer alone. Just when her parents relent, a church friend visits. Debbie Kovach is here to give Gloria communion. As they partake in the ritual, Kovach looks at the girl and asks, "Gloria, would you bless me?"

Gloria touches the woman and starts to cry. "Lord, I'm sorry," Gloria says. "You know I've been down. You know me. Forgive me."

The two pray, and afterward, Gloria surprises her parents. She is going to the Fantozzis. Let her get ready. She will be just a little late.

Says Doug: "Our community will not let us fall."

### **Gloria's life in three minutes**

Doug is barbecuing ribs on his deck. Gloria is asleep in her room. Kristen and five of her children are at the McCanns' house in nearby Kent, relaxing with friends. Alissa is away at the American Cancer Society's "Camp Goodtimes" on Vashon Island, attending even though Gloria could not make it.

At home, it is just Dad and his sleeping little girl.

"Have you ever heard the Gloria song?" Dad asks.

Dad flips through his CDs, telling the back story all the while.

There is a nonprofit organization called the Songs of Love Foundation. It specializes in composing personalized tunes for ill children. About 15 months ago, Joanne Lawrence, another teacher at Kennedy, told him of this foundation.

Dad wrote a letter, detailing Gloria's situation and her personality. A few days later, the family received a CD in the mail.

It is a cheesy but heartfelt number. Dad plays it as loudly as he would a Top-40 hit.

*She's da bomb*

*She's got it going on*

*Glor-eee-uh!*

*Glor-eee-uh!*

*Woo-hoo!*

Dad goes through the meaning behind the lyrics. It details Gloria's life in three minutes.

"Oh, here comes my favorite part!" Dad exclaims near the end.

*Geezy!*

*Deezy!*

"That's her nickname, remember?" Dad asks. "Geezy Deezy. My li'l' Geezy Deezy.

"She'll bounce back. She always does."

Dad plays the song again. This time, he sings along. He tilts his head, looks to the heavens and shouts, "Glor-eee-uh! Glor-eee-uh! Woo-hoo!"

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