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STEVE RINGMAN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Kristen Strauss, Gloria's mother, gives herself her daily injection of medication to treat her multiple sclerosis. She has also dealt with repeated bouts of strep throat.



STEVE RINGMAN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Gloria Strauss is surrounded by her family and friends who are praying for her recovery from cancer during an evening service led by the Rev. Jim Northrup on the family's front deck in Federal Way.



STEVE RINGMAN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

The spread of the cancer to Gloria's bones is increasing her pain to the point where she can't move around unassisted. Gloria is spending more and more time in her room, where she's visited by her brother Sam, at the bottom, and her grandmother, Diane Strauss, who is massaging her legs.

A prayer for Gloria | "We're not out of the water"

By Jerry Brewer

Seattle Times staff columnist

The adults look at Gloria Strauss, amazed.

The 11-year-old moves in ways she could not three weeks ago. She can walk, sometimes gingerly, but she can walk. She can roll over on her swollen body. She has more energy. More life.

"I think we finally got her medicine caught up to her cancer," a hospice nurse tells Gloria's father, Doug Strauss.

"No," Doug retorts.

He prefers a divine explanation.

"I don't believe it was a magic amount of pain medicine," Doug says. "You saw how she was. Look at her now. It's so dramatic." "OK," the nurse hedges. "Something has to be happening."

"That's better," Doug says.

Daughter is up; Mom is down.

Kristen Strauss has strep throat. Her fifth case of strep in the past year, she says. She spent two days bedridden last week.

Maybe fatigue weakens Mom. Maybe it is her multiple sclerosis fiddling with her immune system. She does not know. She just lives.

The Strausses understand pain more than most. Examine their family tree, and illness, especially cancer, hangs on both sides. They do not believe these are random acts of misfortune. This is God's plan, they say.

Catholics believe suffering has value. They live trusting that they suffer neither alone nor in vain. The crucifix has even greater meaning to them, and this symbol of Jesus nailed to the cross gets prominent display in their homes and churches.

So every ailing relative has a purpose, from Mom to Grandma to Aunt Dorothy and beyond: Teach the family how to help Gloria through her struggles. When Gloria receives her healing, it will all make sense, they say. Just watch.

And wait.

"When we're suffering, it's God kissing us," Doug says. "But sometimes we wish God would stop kissing us."

For four years, Gloria has fought neuroblastoma, an unrelenting childhood cancer. Her condition worsened in late April. She is dying, and with doctors unable to discover an elixir, the Strauss family has chosen to abandon cancer treatment and lean on God for a healing miracle.

They do not know exactly what is happening inside Gloria's body. She last had extensive tests for her neuroblastoma in April. At that time, the cancer was infecting her liver, lymph nodes, bone marrow and bones.

The Strausses would like to know what the cancer is doing now, but in most cases, their insurance covers these tests only if they are intended for cancer treatment.

Still, Gloria's improvement uplifts them.

To celebrate, the Strausses invited

some of their closest friends to a special Mass last week on the deck of their Federal Way home. During the service, Doug called Gloria's transformation "a mini-miracle."

Everyone rejoiced. They stood outside the same house that once felt like Gloria's medical holding cell. Inside, it still looks the same, with a hospital bed and various medications scattered in the family den, but all seems brighter.

"We're not out of the water," Doug says. "Her pain is still there." But he adds: "It's been beautiful to see her walking, just beautiful."

Amid the festive Mass, a run-down Kristen Strauss is barely noticed. But fatigue is overtaking Gloria's mother. First Kristen's stomach aches, and then she gets a sore throat.

The next day, she visits the doctor and learns she has strep throat again.

Daughter is up, and Mom is down. Just the way Kristen prefers it. Throughout Gloria's struggles, her mother has offered up her woes to God. If she could, she would happily negotiate a trade.

Kristen's multiple sclerosis for Gloria's cancer.

Kristen learned six years ago she had MS, a chronic and progressive disease that turns the body's central nervous system against itself. For the past five years, however, she has relegated it to a footnote.

Mom self-injects Copaxone daily, usually late at night. She grabs the medicine from the refrigerator and waits 30 minutes for it to reach room temperature. Then she fills the syringe and sticks the needle into her skin.

Doug entered the bedroom last week and found his wife crying. She hit a vein badly with her shot.

"You're always saying your MS is no big deal," he told his wife. "Honey, next time somebody asks about MS, just say, 'I'm doing OK.' Don't act like it's not bothering you."

Kristen nodded, but Kristen is Kristen. She is a 33-year-old mother of seven. Her life is always about someone else.

Before her diagnosis, Kristen experienced MS symptoms gradually. After Maria was born in 1998, Kristen's face went numb, but she recovered so quickly she did not worry.

Kristen gave birth to her fourth child, Joseph, on Aug. 30, 2000. Early the next year, she was helping her oldest daughter, Alissa, with schoolwork when her hands stopped working properly.

"I remember thinking, 'OK, write,' " Kristen said. "And I couldn't think my hand to write. It was the strangest feeling. It's almost like when your hand goes to sleep."

She laughed it off.

On Feb. 28, 2001 — Ash Wednesday, Kristen recalls — she suffered dizziness and numbness. She was

calling her doctor when an earthquake rattled the region. The kids took cover under a table and crawled out when it ended. Mom was still dizzy.

"Is it done?" she asked. "Is the earthquake over?"

"Yeah, Mom, it is," replied Alissa, who was 7 then.

Kristen went to the doctor a few days later, but she did not get a diagnosis. The following Sunday night, she fell, face first, without even using her arms to brace herself. Doug loaded her in the car to get an emergency MRI.

With his wife ill with strep throat,

Doug plays both parental roles. All goes well, except for one night when Gloria's hands start aching. Doug makes an after-hours call to a hospice nurse, who eventually soothes Gloria's pain with warm water.

The next day, Dad observes a disturbing bump on Gloria's head. He goes into his bedroom and alerts Kristen. She cries. They fear it is a tumor.

After returning to the den and taking a closer look, Doug notices a red dot in the middle of her bump. Spider bite.

Five hours later, the knot goes down.

Problem solved, Doug turns up the volume on his CD player, enters the kitchen and makes tacos for dinner.

Kristen's MRI showed brain lesions,

and she was diagnosed with MS. She was crushed. Later, a doctor told her she should not have more children. She was defiant.

She switched doctors.

"All I could think in my head was, 'We'll see about that,' " Kristen said.

In the fifth grade, Kristen wrote in her diary, "I want to have 14 children. Seven girls, seven boys."

She laughs about it now. She is halfway there.

The beginning of her MS tussle was horrible. Seizures. Unsuccessful medications. For a while, she was forced to have a pencil-long needle injected into her thigh. Doug would jab her while Kristen stared at the cross in their home.

On Jan. 10, 2002, Kristen delivered her fifth child, Anthony. Several months later, MS attacked her again. Pregnancy is believed to have a protective effect on women with MS, but symptoms tend to worsen in the months immediately after giving birth.

Kristen spent the summer of 2002 bedridden. That is when Kristen's aunt, Dorothy Trimberger, helped with baby Anthony.

With Kristen ailing and the Strausses needing child-care assistance, Aunt Dorothy and her husband, Mike Trimberger, asked to take Anthony. She made it sound like they were requesting a gift.

"Can we steal Anthony for the weekend?" she would ask, and when Doug drove to meet Aunt Dorothy for the handoff, the two would always have a deep conversation. Doug, only 27 then, came to rely on her

wisdom.

Aunt Dorothy was strong. She fought off breast cancer. She also helped several of her siblings wrestle with cancer.

"She always gave us strength, always built us up," Kristen said.

Since October 2002, Kristen has had no major problems with MS. She delivered two more children: 3-year-old Sam and 10-month-old Vincent. During her last doctor's visit, Kristen was told she has a healthy brain.

The disease is sleeping, but she wonders if her troubles with strep throat are a sign of a weakened immune system. She will not complain, however.

"With my MS, I felt God prepared me for Gloria's cancer," Kristen said.

In November 2002, a month after Kristen rose from MS, Gloria's grandmother discovered she had breast cancer.

Four months later, Gloria learned of her neuroblastoma.

Four months after that, Aunt Dorothy quietly retreated to the background. Brain cancer. Typical Aunt Dorothy, she tried to minimize her misery.

She died July 25, 2004. Gloria was more than a year into her struggle. Aunt Dorothy left her family with a lesson.

"I lost my Aunt Dorothy in the fourth grade," said Alissa, who is 13 now. "Then it really hit me what cancer can do."

Kristen is still resting,

so Doug puts \$10 on a table and asks 13-year-old Alissa to clean the den. She agrees, but then Dad requests that she clean the kitchen, too.

"Dad, the kitchen?" Alissa groans.

Doug swipes his \$10 and puts it in his pocket. "OK, now, how about you do the kitchen, too?" Dad demands. Then he walks outside to clean the yard.

When he returns, the den and kitchen look spotless. Dad grins.

"Hey," he tells Alissa. "You can have \$10 and get a couple of the new CDs you want."

Gloria's grandmother, Diane Strauss, received her last chemotherapy treatment the same day Gloria was given her first. They were bald at the same time. They took a picture together.

Grandma treated her breast cancer like a joke. Even though she was sick, she demanded to baby-sit the grandkids. She attended the Kennedy High School basketball games Doug coached.

She pushed so hard she caught pneumonia. Then she recovered and pushed some more.

After surgery, chemo and radiation, Grandma was healthy again. It was not that hard, she says. Gloria's cancer is "10 times worse."

When Grandma is around, Gloria falls asleep in her lap. Grandma knows just the right touch for Gloria's aching legs. Gloria is unafraid to be vulnerable around Grandma.

"I actually feel I got cancer so I could help Gloria through her cancer," Diane Strauss says.

Cancer feasts on the Strauss/Trimberger family, but they do not sulk. They use it to support Gloria.

A few months ago, Gloria spent the night at her grandmother's house and noticed another similarity. Grandma's body is marked with small, freckle-like dots from when she received radiation therapy, too.

"Grandma, you've got tattoos just like me," Gloria said.

"Yes," Grandma replied. "I'm just like you, honey."

As promised, Dad gives Alissa

money for new CDs. Theresa Brennan, a 17-year-old family friend, drives Alissa and her two sisters to Wal-Mart one afternoon.

Gloria is excited. Her illness rarely allows for these types of outings — no parents, just the girls — anymore. She primps for Wal-Mart.

When they arrive at the store, Gloria tells Theresa she is in pain. Theresa fetches an electric cart. Gloria smiles shyly. Theresa realizes she is embarrassed.

"Gloria, you know what?" Theresa says. "You have every right to ride in that. And you look so cute. No one's going to think any less of you."

Gloria gets in the cart and roams the store. When it is time to leave, Theresa pulls her car to the curb to make it easier for Gloria.

Gloria rises from the cart. The medical port just below her right shoulder is visible, and she is carrying a bag of medicine. With each step, Gloria exaggerates her limp as she approaches the car.

"Gloria, what are you doing?" Theresa asks playfully.

The aspiring actress smiles and says, "I don't want it to look like I shouldn't be riding the cart."

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