

Longest Living Transplant Survivor: Nancy's Story

Nancy King McLain is the world's longest living bone marrow transplant survivor.

Nancy

Her medical history reads like a fascinating chapter in the history of medicine. The recipient of a bone marrow transplant in 1963, Nancy King McLain is the world's longest living bone marrow transplant survivor.

"I'm not the oldest survivor," Nancy reminds, "I've just been around the longest."

The physician who performed Nancy's transplant as his very first, Robert Kyle, MD, of Mayo Clinic, remains her doctor today. It's not often he gets to follow a patient for over 50 years, he told Nancy on her last visit. Nancy says that it's also not often one has an octogenarian hematologist who still works five days a week, takes the stairs to his sixth floor office to get his exercise and remains an inspiration.

1960

In 1960, on her first trip to Disneyland with her family, seven-year-old Nancy showed her mom a pillow stained with blood coming from her gums. The family went home and took Nancy to the dentist who sent her to a doctor who diagnosed Nancy with rheumatic fever and ordered her to bed for two months.

Already grounded too long by her illness, Nancy was not happy when the same doctor sent her to Mayo Clinic when she didn't recover. She was bursting to get back to her active life of besting the boys in the neighborhood with her twin sister, Bonnie. But it was three more years before Nancy was back to outrunning the neighbor boys in her hometown of Canby, Minnesota.

Instead, it was a life in those years of 180 mile commutes to Mayo for needles, pain, and scars. Each car ride was marked with bleeding from her nose and mouth so profuse that three sets of bed sheets were needed to stop its flow on the road.

At Mayo, doctors undertook to save Nancy's life with whatever resources they had at the time. There were blood transfusions. "I had 98. My mom kept count," Nancy says.

There were medications, like prednisone, which altered her growth. She had biopsies taken with big, painful needles from her chest while awake, leaving intense scarring. Nancy calls these days the dark ages in comparison to how bone marrow transplant patients are treated now.

Her spleen was removed in order to increase her platelet count. Blood was withdrawn, Nancy recalls, and mixed with "all kinds of things and then put back into me."

Nothing worked.

"I was given last rites twice," Nancy says, "because I was not supposed to make it through the night a few times when I was

sick."

And then one day at the clinic, as Nancy's sister Bonnie ran around, Dr. Kyle inquired who the lively little girl was. She looked markedly different than Nancy, whose appearance had dramatically changed from medication. A new piece of information emerged that had somehow escaped her doctors in those days: Nancy had an identical twin sister. Bone marrow transplantation was just starting to be explored and only with identical twins. It had never been done successfully at Mayo in 1963.

It was a last ditch effort, Nancy says, that the very young hematologist was called upon to perform. Dr. Robert Kyle had received a short training from Dr. E. Donnall Thomas, now known as the father of bone marrow transplantation, at the Mary Imogene Bassett Hospital, in Cooperstown, New York. In those days, there were no blood tests to confirm that a patient and donor were a match. Instead, Nancy and Bonnie each had a piece of tissue from their own hand, grafted onto the other's hand to make absolute sure they were identical twins. There was no rejection. It was a perfect match.

Six weeks of isolation later, Nancy was sprung.

"I remember the boredom of those weeks, waiting," Nancy says. "And there was no Ronald McDonald House or Make-A-Wish to distract me."

The illness, drama, long rides and bleeding stopped on that June day of her transplant in 1963. There was no more bleeding and no side effects. She was a twin sister again, with an ordinary life, running and biking faster than the boys.

A life saved is not only about that one life, but all the lives that are later affected, like the elementary school children whom Nancy taught, and the high school children with autism whom Nancy helped with her innovative program that started in one school and soon went to four.

That Nancy's life was saved meant the birth of her two children and two grandchildren.

Nancy has been asked to tell her story at places like an international symposium in San Diego where she was celebrated like a star.

"Who knew you could be famous for growing old," she jokes.

Today, Nancy waits impatiently for more grandchildren, travels, and takes time to smell the coffee. She once prayed to live to be an old woman who was sweeter and better rather than older and bitter. She has succeeded.

Nancy is grateful to many but most especially to her two heroes: Dr. Robert Kyle, who gave her life back to her, and her sister, Bonnie, who agreed at 10 years old to donate marrow to save her twin's life.

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