

Bridges

CONNECTING CANCER SURVIVORS

■ VOL. 18, FALL 2012

Adjusting

By Karl G. Merchant

Karl Merchant received his bone marrow transplant two years ago and is currently living with his two dogs in Pennsylvania where he paints and writes. He also does some consulting in event planning and acquisition.



It was a day after my surgery in 2005 and I felt pretty good. My surgeon came into my room. "I have some bad news, Mr. Merchant. We looked at the cells of the mass we took out of you and they are cancerous." It was a rare form of acute myeloid leukemia. I decided to go to Memorial Sloan-Kettering for treatment. After chemotherapy my cancer went into remission. I went back to work and stayed in remission for four years. Then in 2009 the cancer came back with pneumonia. This time I would need a bone marrow transplant.

I am one of the most fortunate bone marrow candidates. Four matches

(ten-out-of-ten criteria) were found. In less than two months my match was chosen and the transplant date was scheduled. On December 24, 2009, I received a T-cell-depleted peripheral blood stem cell transplant from a matched unrelated male donor. It was a simple procedure.

After the transplant I had no interest in food. The staff gently eased me back into an eating routine. With their encouragement I continued to get some exercise and a shower each day. The thing I disliked the most was social isolation. I regularly received platelets for clotting factor, had some problems

with anti-nausea medicine, and slept a lot. My wife of 36 years, who died from breast cancer last year, came and stayed with me when she could. I was grateful that I recovered and was able to be her caregiver. There were some bumps in the road to recovery. They are not the same for everyone. I developed fluid in my pleural spaces. I had a recurrence of yellow jaundice and had another small case of pneumonia.

There are certain milestones I look back upon with fondness: eating a tuna fish sandwich without throwing up; walking two blocks to get a cup of coffee with-

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Memorial Sloan-Kettering
Cancer Center

Resource Review: Audio Biography Project

Following the success of MSKCC's pilot collaboration with StoryCorps in the spring of 2011, the Department of Volunteer Resources is pleased to announce the launch of MSKCC's Audio Biography Project (AB Project). The mission of the AB Project will be to record the stories of MSKCC's community. Through the collaboration with StoryCorps we saw the meaning that recording one's story can bring to our patient population and we are now excited to extend this opportunity to the entire MSKCC community, which includes patients, caregivers, and staff members. This program is a great way to

celebrate and share personal narratives with your loved ones. Volunteer staff are trained and prepared to record these 30-minute interviews. Participants should allot 45 minutes for the entire recording process. Participants will receive a copy of the interview to share with friends and family.

Recordings will take place at Bendheim Integrative Medicine Center, 1429 First Avenue (at 74 Street), on Tuesdays from 10:00 to 1:00 PM and on Thursdays from 2:00 to 5:00 PM. To schedule your own recording please call 212-639-5980.

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out having to sit down and take a break; returning to my home in Pennsylvania.

As of this writing it has been 28 months since my transplant. I have dietary precautions to which I must adhere. I go to the gym three days a week. I have taken up oil painting and writing as serious hobbies. I serve as a Patient-to-Patient volunteer for the hospital, speaking with patients who are considering a bone marrow transplant.

The constant monitoring by my MSKCC medical team has been most helpful during my recovery. Adjusting to a less active life requires vigilance. My immune system has not fully recovered and I am still waiting for the time when I can receive my immunizations.

I am adjusting to the fact that recovery takes time. I feel stronger mentally in facing challenges and I value my relationships with family and friends even more, which I didn't think was possible. I feel humble and honored that I have been given this gift of new life.

If you are considering a bone marrow transplant, here is what I have learned:

- a) The decision is personal. Whatever choice you make will be the correct one.
- b) The recovery process may include bumps in the road and requires patience.
- c) A positive mental attitude is very important.
- d) Adhere to your medical team's advice.
- e) Live life every day.

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Bridges is available at
www.mskcc.org/bridges.

If you would like to connect with other survivors through the Resources for Life After Cancer Program, please see the online calendar at www.mskcc.org/livingbeyondcancer.

PATIENT – TO – PATIENT

We are grateful for the support of our patients and family members. If you are a former patient or family member who has completed treatment please consider becoming a Patient-to-Patient volunteer.

For more information e-mail patient2patient@mskcc.org.

Visible Ink™ A one-on-one Writing Program for MSKCC patients

Interested patients will work individually with the guidance, encouragement, and support of a professional writer on a topic and project of their choice.

This program is **FREE**. All levels and writing interests welcome.

For more information or to arrange a writing session, please contact Judith Kelman at 212-535-3985 or kelmanj@mskcc.org.



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