

## Betting on beating the odds

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by Tammy Sakry

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After years of working to improve the lives of their two autistic children, Greg and Tiffany Gehring have another battle to fight.

Greg was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in November.

It started out with a simple backache in the upper/mid-back, said the 40-year-old St. Francis man.

St. Francis couple Greg and Tiffany Gehring are no strangers to challenges raising two autistic children. Recently they started a new challenge – Greg was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in November. (Photo by Tammy Sakry)

As a drywall tapper, it's happened before, said Greg.

But the muscle rubs and the over-the-counter pain relievers were not helping.

After about four weeks, Greg gave into his wife's suggestion to go to the doctors.

Finding nothing on the Nov. 5 X-ray, the doctors gave him pain killers and muscle relaxers and sent him home.

Two days later, after a big dinner at his mother-in-laws, "the pain got a lot worse," said Greg.

It was unimaginable, he said.

Tiffany and her mother had both noticed Greg's eyes were yellow.

A trip to the emergency room did not reveal the source of the pain, but Greg's blood count was off.

"I figured it was my gall bladder. I would have to get it out," he said.

The next day a MRI revealed a little spot on his pancreas.

"They basically said don't worry," Greg said. The chances he had pancreatic cancer was 2 percent, he said.

When the doctor came in with the results, he closed the door and sat down.

"I knew it was not good," said Greg.

Pancreatic cancer.

"It hit me like a ton of bricks," said Greg.

The doctor had to call Tiffany because he didn't want to tell her, according to Greg.

With the diagnosis in, Greg did not waste time setting up surgery.

Because he wanted to be home for their daughter Tatum's fourth birthday and for Christmas, Greg went in for the 12-hour surgery.

Surgeons removed the head of Greg's pancreas, 30 percent of his stomach, the gall bladder and parts of his small intestine and his liver.

They were successful at removing the cancerous mass, said Greg.

With only four of 10 lymph nodes showing the cancer, the surgery was considered a success, he said.

But shortly after returning home, Greg noticed blood in his urine.

The doctor determined it was a stomach ulcer and gave him medication, said Greg.

Jan. 3 Greg started throwing up massive quantities of blood.

Back in the hospital, doctors discovered a tiny leak in the pancreatic sutures, said Greg.

They also discovered a mass in his liver.

Once the pancreatic cancer is in the body, doctors can't get rid of it, said Tiffany.

Greg started the new year with a six-week chemotherapy regimen.

The doctors said he has six months to a year to live, said Tiffany.

"I don't believe them. I don't feel like I'm dying," said Greg.

He will follow the doctors' orders to the letter, just not that one, he said.

The doctors originally told him there was only a 2 percent chance that he had pancreatic cancer, said Greg.

"Then I should be in the 2 percent chance of beating this cancer," he said.

Greg was asked by a friend what was on his "bucket list."

"I haven't even thought of any ideas for a bucket list. I'm not there yet," he said.

This is just another obstacle to get through, like the children's autism, said Greg.

His current plan is to do what the doctors tell him, play with the kids and having as much fun as possible, he said.

"I'm going through life like I always do," Greg said.

"I can't help being happy around the kids."

They keep him from feeling sorry for himself or from noticing how sick he is feeling, Greg said.

As much as he is enjoying being at home with his kids and Tiffany, a stay-at-home mom, Greg said he wants to return to work.

The last time he worked was Nov. 7, 2008 and he really misses the guys he works with and going to work.

"I'm afraid he will miss out on time with the family if he is working," said Tiffany.

While Greg's health insurance is covering most of his medical bills, the couple are behind on their bills.

He had just got back to work after being laid off, said Tiffany.

The couple recently filed for Chapter 13 bankruptcy.

They were going to let the house go and move into his mother-in-law's, said Greg.

But they forgot to take into account the effect it would have on their autistic children.

Logan was hurting himself while Greg was in the hospital and Tatum started having problems while attending Lifelong Learning Center, something she loves to do, said Tiffany.

Logan reacts to stressful situations by hurting himself and Tatum had more tantrums, Greg said.

"If they had to move it would kill Logan," said Greg.

"This is his place and it is what he knows."

"And if something were to happen to Greg, Logan couldn't handle it all. It would be too much," said Tiffany.

The couple, who have married for nearly seven years, are trying to work with the bank to keep their home and modify their \$1,800 monthly mortgage.

Right now they are about four months behind, said Tiffany.

They also want to be able to stay in the neighborhood, which has been very supportive, according to Tiffany.

People have been bringing over food and cards. One of the neighbors even went on a milk run for him, said Greg, who admits to becoming a chocolate milk addict since his November surgery.

His co-workers have also been extremely supportive, he said.

One co-worker brought over a really good back massager, toys for the kids, Cub gift card and gave Tiffany \$50 and told her to do something for herself, said Greg.

His co-workers also raised \$1,500 for them during a benefit.

There will be larger benefit for the Gehrings March 7 at the Coon Rapids VFW.

Although Greg was resistant to the benefit at first, family and friends were able to talk him into it after the couple decided to try and save their house.

Once of his neighbors, Steve Kretsinger, is the lead guitarist for High Noon and he offered to play the benefit for free, said Greg.

Now he is excited to see friends he has not seen in 20 years, he said.

And his excited to see who will win the autographed jersey of his favorite quarter back, Brett Favre.

While some of his friends have distance themselves from the Gehrings, Tiffany encourages them to call her husband and tease him like normal.

"I haven't changed. Treat me the same," Greg said.

First fight

When Logan followed a year after the Gehrings' February 2002 wedding, autism was the last thing on their minds.

There had been no children in either of their families born with autism, said Tiffany.

She was concerned about Down syndrome and the other ailments that could strike children, she said.

“Autism wasn’t on the list to be concerned about,” Tiffany said.

Logan stopped saying mommy and daddy and eating around 11 months, Greg said.

He would have severe temper tantrums and stopped playing with his toys, he said.

All Logan wanted to do was watch videos and drink from a baby bottle, said Tiffany.

During a visit to the pediatrician’s office, the doctor noticed Logan tuned out the entire world and would walk into things because he did not see them, according to Greg.

It was hard for the couple to hear their son could have autism.

While the couple hated the pediatrician at the time, they are grateful to her now.

Early detection and treatment are the best in the long run, said Tiffany.

Logan was a little more than a year old when he was diagnosed as having severe classic autism.

The only thing he knew about autism at that time was 1988 movie, “Rain Man,” said Greg.

Greg played a lot of sports in high school and he had dreams and hopes for his son, said Tiffany.

“It was hard for him to hear (the diagnosis),” she said.

The development disorder affects social interaction and autistic children can be overwhelmed by every day stimulus and exhibit repetitive behaviors.

Logan would only eat baby food because he could not handle the feel of solid food in his mouth, said Tiffany.

"I can't tell you how many times he has thrown up because he couldn't handle it," she said.

Although some autistic children do not display affection, "Logan is just amazing. He can still love and hug," Greg said.

Logan loves going to kindergarten at St. Francis Elementary School and his fellow students love him, said Tiffany.

When pregnant with their daughter, Tiffany was told there would only be a 5 percent chance that she could have another autistic child.

Although originally misdiagnosed with a different neurological disorder, Tatum also has autism.

She is more in tune with the world and is higher functioning than Logan, said Tiffany.

Tatum gets stuck in her routines and has to have everything lined up, she said.

Although the couple attempted to get the children into special schools, like Minnesota Early Autism Project, they were turned away.

They didn't want to accept Logan because they were afraid they would not succeed with him and harm their success rate, said Greg.

The project would only take Tatum because she is higher functioning, he said.

The couple decided to enroll both children in St. Francis Independent School District 15.

"Tatum loves it," said Tiffany.

While she is more social than her brother, Tatum likes to just watch the other kids. She's a diva, according to her mother.

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