



Medical Hero in the Spotlight

Jenna Korb: Back from the Brink

Happy dreams of a promising future can vanish in an instant.

That's what Jenna Korb, then a bright, lively college student from Montana, learned when she went to the school nurse for a check-up.

In 1993, then-19-year-old Jenna had been feeling exhausted and lightheaded. She decided to drop by the college nurse for a spur-of-the-moment exam.

"I thought I'd get a quick slap on the hand for not getting more sleep and not eating better," says Jenna.

But the nurse told her she looked terrible. "When she pricked my finger for a drop of blood, it didn't even look normal," recalls Jenna, now age 35 and the Executive Director for the [Leukemia & Lymphoma Society San Diego/Hawaii Chapter](#).

Jenna was rushed to the local hospital and soon transferred to the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle. There she was diagnosed with myelodysplastic syndrome, in which blood cells that develop in the bone marrow are defective and die off.

The prognosis was dire. Jenna began undergoing chemotherapy, but she needed a bone marrow transplant to survive. "They told me I had six months to find a match; it took me four months, which was pretty good," says Jenna.

"One of the most devastating things was losing my hair and looking so sick," recalls Jenna, "I didn't get a wig; I got great at tying scarves."

No time to think about her decision

As she was getting ready to undergo the bone marrow transplant, doctors approached Jenna about taking part in clinical trials.

"They walked in with a very thick stack of paperwork. They said, 'Here are your options, you pick one or two,'" says Jenna.

She decided to participate in two trials. "One was a medication for rejection that would allow me to take one pill after the transplant rather than 10 or 15," she says. "The other was a clinical

trial for a drug I could take during treatment that would help relieve nausea."

The clinical trials procedures at Fred Hutchinson were well-organized, Jenna recalls. "Everything they did was centralized. My responsibility was taking the pills and they recorded everything"

After the bone marrow transplant, Jenna spent 40 days in a Laminar air flow room, which keeps the air free of any impurities or pathogens that could lead to infection.

"I had gotten to the point that I was overwhelmed with the amount of medication I was taking," says Jenna. "I started to skip taking the pills. The researchers came in and said 'We can't effectively track your response to all these drugs because you're not taking everything we want you to take.' They monitored me very closely."

New challenges appeared as Jenna struggled with her body's rejection of the bone marrow. She wound up in intensive care several times, and at one point was put into a drug-induced

coma.

"I held onto the fact that I was taking that one pill versus the fact that I could have been taking many more," says Jenna.

Gradually, Jenna's condition improved. Seven years later, Jenna's doctors declared her disease free.

"The cool thing was I took that particular drug and it has a different name now, but seven years later, one of my coworkers at the Leukemia center was given that same drug after her transplant. It was really neat to see that something I had taken is still out there working and helping with rejection to bone marrow transplant."

Now Jenna's treatments and tests are in the past. "I'm 100 % healthy. I graduated from college, met and married my husband, and moved to San Diego," says Jenna. This year, Jenna, her husband, their golden retriever and two cats celebrated her 16th anniversary of being diagnosed.

"Life is pretty darn good," says Jenna.



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