

Termite pesticide underneath Pasadena house caused young girl to get an autoimmune disease

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By Zen Vuong | December 19, 2019

City of Hope's eponymous float embodies the 2020 Rose Parade theme, "The Power of Hope." There can be no hope if there is no future. The leading-edge treatments and compassionate care City of Hope provides give people the gift of time to live their best life.

Nine patients will ride on the float. They came to City of Hope to beat the odds and live a long life filled with joyous moments with family and friends.

Annie Tighe, who is attending Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, was 4 years old when she was diagnosed with aplastic anemia, an autoimmune disease where the body stops producing enough new blood cells. The condition causes fatigue, a higher risk of infections and uncontrolled bleeding. Her parents later discovered that the origin of her illness was a termite pesticide called chlordane that had been banned in 1988. The toxic substance was seeping through the walls of their home in Pasadena, California, in the early 2000s and sickening their youngest child of four. They immediately moved.

When Tighe was 5, she received a bone marrow transplant at City of Hope that used umbilical cord blood. A year and a half later, the condition returned. The Tighe family tried different treatments, including immunosuppressive therapy, at other hospitals but eventually returned to City of Hope for a second bone marrow transplant when Tighe was 12.

Tighe, now 18 and cured, reflects on her disease journey as she mentally prepares to start the new year on a rosy note aboard City of Hope's Rose Parade float.

After your diagnosis, what were your main worries and challenges?

I was 4r years old when I was diagnosed with aplastic anemia, so it's hard to say. But I knew my life would be different. I later learned that I couldn't do a lot of the things that normal kids can do, including going on class trips and playing sports. Even with these obstacles, I still had an amazing childhood because my family tried to make my life as normal as possible. They made sure I experienced many different things. The focus was always on what I could do, not what I couldn't.

Now that I'm older, I see how much of a toll my illness took on my family. It must have been very stressful to have a young daughter who constantly had to go to the doctor. I've had over 600 blood draws and more than 80 transfusions in my lifetime. I've had two bone marrow transplants that required 100 days of isolation. There were so many procedures! I spent more than 15% of my childhood at the doctor's office or in hospitals.

My condition literally uprooted my life. My parents moved out of the house that was making me sick and we moved into a rental house. We initially didn't have a lot of stuff because my parents worried the items from the old home were contaminated. We also had a difficult time finding a new house to buy because each house we were interested in needed to be tested for chlordane.

Why did you decide to come to City of Hope?

My parents decided to come to City of Hope for my bone marrow transplant because they knew City of Hope is a leader in this procedure. City of Hope is a research hospital that does cutting-edge research on cancer and different medical techniques.

City of Hope was very welcoming. Even the hospital building was bright – wall to ceiling windows with a fantastic view of the San Gabriel Mountains. The view is important because after a bone marrow transplant, you can't go outside for about 100 days because your immune system needs to power back up.

I was so young, so it's hard to remember too much, but I do remember that everyone was super kind and nice. The nurses and doctors were there to take care of me and make me feel comfortable.

What would you like to share about the specialized treatment you received at City of Hope?

I always felt that the people at City of Hope were there not only to cure my disease but also to make sure the rest of my life was happy and that I was mentally doing well and being stimulated. I always felt like I was part of the City of Hope family. When I came back for my second bone marrow transplant, a lot of the same nurses were there and they were so happy to get caught up on my life. Even now, when I see them, they always ask me how I'm doing. They don't look at me and see a disease. They see a person who needs compassionate care.

It's funny because I have so many good memories of my time at City of Hope. Even though I was there to treat a scary disease, I have warm and fuzzy memories of City of Hope, which was always on the top of their game – always interested in learning more and doing more research.

You are now disease-free. How has your perspective on life changed?

I'm more appreciative of life and find happiness in so many different places. I have a better appreciation of life than a lot of my peers. I'm grateful that I no longer have endless nose bleeds and can be out in nature. Before, I couldn't necessarily go out and hike or go running for fear of dirt and mold spores.

Why would you recommend City of Hope to other people seeking treatment for cancer, diabetes or life-threatening diseases?

I would absolutely recommend City of Hope. City of Hope cured me twice, and I had an amazing experience. I love the community that I felt there. I knew I was in good hands and moving toward my goal of getting cured. When I returned for my second bone marrow transplant, I knew I would be taken care of.

How did “The Power of Hope,” this year’s Rose Parade theme, help bring you back to health?

When my condition was at its worst, my family, my extended family, people my dad and mom knew – they were all praying for me. I have a page from my grandfather’s diary where he wrote that he was praying for me when he heard a voice repeating over and over that I would be fine. People from all religions had me in their thoughts. In the end, prayer boils down to hope. Everyone had hope that I would one day be healthy again, and I am so thankful that I am.