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**Thielke faces many challenges, including AML, in young life**

*Summary: University of Minnesota, Morris student Tiffany Thielke and fellow cancer survivor, Barb Lesmeister, were co-chairs for this year's Stevens County Relay for Life.*

(July 16, 2008)-by Britney Appier, Morris Sun Tribune -- Morris resident Tiffany Thielke walked—barely—into the emergency room of an Alexandria hospital in October 2003, suffering from severe leg pain. Originally believing it was just a pinched nerve, they went to the chiroprator, but the test came out negative. It was when Thielke developed a high fever that she stumbled into the emergency room.

After several tests the local hospital sent her to a Twin Cities facility where Thielke received bad news: She had Acute Myelogenous Leukemia.

AML is a form of cancer that starts in blood forming tissue such as the bone marrow and causes large numbers of blood cells to be produced and enter the bloodstream, according to the National Cancer Institute.

Most patients are not cured with current therapy.

Thielke and fellow cancer survivor Barb Lesmeister, were the co-chairs for the 2008 Stevens County Relay for Life.

The county's 16th annual Relay began with opening ceremonies at 6 p.m. Friday, July 18 at Pomme de Terre Park and concluded at 6 a.m. Saturday, July 19.

When she was diagnosed, Thielke was a student at Alexandria Technical College. She was trying to focus on school and beating her cancer, but only one professor agreed to allow her to complete the semester.

Thielke underwent the induction stage of chemotherapy first, where they gave her a very high dose of chemo to kill off all the bad cells. After the high doses they give four smaller doses, which is known as consolidation treatment. Though the doses are smaller Thielke says those were the hardest.

On the third consolidation treatment, because her platelette count was so low, she almost bled to death. The doctors said she should not have made it through because they could not stop the bleeding.

Eventually the chemo eliminated the AML and Thielke was considered in remission.

Thielke thought the cancer was gone after that, but in November 2005 she started feeling poorly again. During a regular doctor's visit, medical professionals again performed tests and, again, sent her to the Twin Cities for further examinations.

AML was back.

Thielke needed a bone marrow transplant but no match was found. Instead stem cells -- cells taken from an umbilical cord -- were used as a replacement. Since Feb. 21, 2006, that Thielke has been in remission.

Thielke was very dependent on her friends and family for the few months after the surgery.

Thielke said that she “definitely could not have done it or made it through all of it without the support and help of friends and family.”

Though her AML is in remission, other problems continue to plague the 23-year-old University of Minnesota, Morris student. After the stem cells were placed in her body, she developed Graft-Versus-Host Disease, which develops when cells from the donated body attack that of the host body. Though this is very common Thielke says that she “was unable to eat anything for a while until it was under control by medication.”

Thielke also developed a very rare disease called Pulmonary Veno Occlusive Disease (PVOD), which is a disease that affects her heart and lungs. This makes “activity difficult, even walking” Thielke said. Her body can't get enough oxygen, leaving her short of breath.”

Despite the many health problems that Thielke has had to deal with over the past few years, she remains completely modest about what she has been through. Though Thielke was very depressed and angry at a few points, she “tried to keep the attitude that things could be worse and there is nothing [she could] do to change things except fight like hell and make it through everything.”

Her advice to those suffering with the same disease is to “take things one day at a time because there are too many unknowns that can happen and planning ahead can make things harder.” For those who need something to look forward to, Thielke believes it is better to plan events instead of dates because “if you miss the date it is more like a loss if it doesn't happen.”

Since Thielke left Alexandria Technical College, she has been at UMM as a part-time student. She has been involved in many organizations, including Entre Nous, the French club, the UMM disability alliance, and a volunteer at Red Cross blood drives.

Thielke remains an active person, fighting through the health problems she has had and continues to have.

The people at UMM makes it easier for Thielke to deal with her health problems.

“The professors are much more understanding, which makes dealing with all of these issues a lot easier,” she said.

Recently, Thielke was thrown from a horse she was riding and suffered a broken hip and elbow. The injuries forced her to cancel a trip to France.

Since the trip is out, Thielke decided to become involved in a friend's Relay for Life team. Thielke's friend then approached her about being one of the chairs. Thielke accepted the offer and said she's looking forward to the event.

Photo: Tiffany Thielke

Thielke's mother, Gail Boe, works in Plant Services at UMM.

Story courtesy of the Morris Sun Tribune

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