

This series is called STA stories, and my story is truly an STA story.

My story is about what you, the St Thomas Aquinas parish, did to support our family when our son Joey, now 15, was diagnosed with cancer almost 7 years ago.

In January 2005, Joey, then a second grader, complained of leg pain above his knee following an indoor soccer game with his twin brother Robbie. Joey and Robbie were quite athletic, and it was unusual enough for Joey to complain that I— uncharacteristically — made a doctor's appointment for him the next day. Our pediatrician, Dr. Kelley, checked Joey out, said it was probably nothing, but took an x-ray as a precaution. One of our many blessings— Dr. Kelley, brought to us 15 years ago by one of the first STA parishioners we met, Barb Glass.

The x-ray showed some kind of growth, and we were summoned to Riley Hospital. Another blessing— Riley Hospital, an outstanding medical facility that we are lucky to have here in our city. Riley is a true children’s hospital – which also means, it is a parents’ hospital. They understand how worried parents are and do everything possible to reassure, comfort and respond quickly. Although there was early hope that Joey had only a bone infection, a biopsy later that week confirmed our worst fears. Joey had a form of bone cancer called osteosarcoma.. By then, the STA community was on full alert – in fact, Fr. Munshower and the Gardner family somehow showed up at our house within minutes of our getting the phone call from Riley. And, that might be the ONLY visit where Father didn’t ask what were having for dinner!

As news spread of Joey’s diagnosis and treatment schedule -- 9 months of every other week in hospital chemo treatments,

punctuated by a major surgery in New York in April to remove the tumor in his leg -- the STA community kicked into high gear. First and always there were the prayers – literally, a storming of heaven. Then there were the acts -- Joanie Morris organized STA families to deliver meals during the days that Joey was in the hospital. Dangerous to have your children learn that pretty much every mother at STA is a better cook than you are!! Laurie Seeber took over supervising after school homework for the older kids, Charlie and Sally. Joey's second grade classmates delivered a huge box of gifts – books, games, toys - all designed to occupy Joey during his hospital stays. The Plummers had Sally over so often they should have claimed her as a dependent on their taxes, and the Gardner kids made sure Joey was an honorary member of every team they were on. Susannah McManus and Joanie Morris alternated daily visits to give Joey his shots because he trusted a nurse...not a mom! Parents kept their even marginally sick kids home from school,

knowing Joey's immune system was weak. Barb Glass filled in as emergency babysitter when I just HAD to get my hair colored. Our friends visited and entertained us, with spirits, to keep up our spirits. Dozens of cards arrived every day – including from St Thomas parishioners that we did not know – just to tell us that they were praying for Joey and for our family. And people weren't just saying that – they were doing it. I name these particular people and actions only as illustrations-- I cannot possibly list everything that was done – but we remember and appreciate every single one of them.

Two things stand out as testaments to the love found in the St Thomas parish. When Joey's hair started to fall out after his first chemo treatment, he decided to go ahead and shave it. Robbie bravely stepped up for the same. Losing his hair was the thing that Joey dreaded most about having cancer, in fact, I think those were the only tears he shed that were not induced

by physical pain. He could not bear the thought of going out in public completely bald. Well, not to worry – two days later, at the weekly school mass, there were a lot of newly bald heads. From cool eighth graders to oblivious kindergartners, almost every boy at St Thomas had shaved his head. I have to let my tears speak for our feelings about that. We honor that sacrifice every year through St Baldrick's, a charity that Chuck became involved in, that raises money for children's cancer research through head shaving events. Beginning in 2006, St Thomas Aquinas school has held an annual St Baldrick's event, and our family sponsors the "adult" event. Mark your calendars for March 9. Many, many St Thomas parishioners, young and old, have shaved – in fact, Gerry O'Connor became a Knight of the Bald Table this year for having shaved and raised money for 7 consecutive years, and STA members contribute generously every year. The combined Indianapolis events have raised over \$600,000, and Riley has received several research grants

through the organization. Through the work of St Baldrick's, which is second only to the US government in funding children's cancer research, progress is being made to find a cure for children's cancer.

The second amazing event was the prayer vigil. After much research, consultation and prayer, we determined to have Joey's surgery at Memorial Sloan Kettering in New York. We had decided on rotationplasty, a procedure whereby the leg is basically amputated above the knee, and the ankle "turned" into a knee joint, with a prosthetic for the lower leg. While physically very unappealing, it provides great function, and at that stage in technology, was a better long term bet than a steel rod, the likely alternative. About a week before the surgery, we learned that because the chemo had shrunk the tumor, there was a chance that Joey could keep his knee and leg, and an allograft or cadaver bone, would be used to replace the

diseased portion of the femur. We would not know until the surgery – scheduled for 15 hours – began. Joey and I would be in NYC for 4-6 weeks for the surgery and recovery. Because Joey would miss his First Communion, Norma Seib, Bonnie Stevens and Fr. Munshower decided to stage a “private” First Communion at a school mass, held the day before Joey’s surgery. It was a beautiful and moving experience. After the mass ended, Chuck, Joey and I flew to New York City, and the 24 hour prayer vigil, organized by Karen Gardner and Gail Rowe, began at St Thomas. All day, and all night STA parishioners came into the chapel to pray for Joey’s successful surgery. As they wheeled Joey into the operating room at 7 the next morning, hundreds of miles away, Chuck and I could feel – and I mean, literally feel – the prayers of STA around us. We were at ease leaving Joey in the hands of his skilled and dedicated surgeon, Dr. Healey. The surgery was a success, Joey was able to keep his leg, and most importantly, he has been

cancer free for nearly 7 years. After a complete redo 3 years later, a couple of fine tuning surgeries, skilled physical therapy by Pattie Proffit, and hard work by Joey, he was cleared to play CYO basketball for the first time this year. A much yearned for milestone.

This is a time of year to take stock of our blessings. St. Thomas, which we stumbled upon because I was lucky enough to have Marjorie Maginn as my first boss when we moved to Indianapolis in 1996, is at the heart of our family's many blessings. When Chuck decided to convert to Catholicism eight years ago, Fr. Munshower encouraged him to visit other Catholic churches because "St Thomas is different." It's the only catholic church we've known as adults, so we can't compare, but if different means filled with loving, generous people who strive to live – not just mouth – Jesus' teachings, then yes, we agree. It's different. Thank God, and thank you.

