

# BONE MARROW TRANSPLANT

Celebrating a Milestone

*Sue Tonry took up quilting six years ago as a way of saying “thank you.”*

*Shown: Sue Tonry is the founder of Quilts for Comfort, a non-profit organization inspired by her experience in the Bone and Marrow Transplant Program at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital and Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey where she was treated for acute myeloid leukemia. The Program recently celebrated its 1000th transplant.*



She wanted to give back to Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJ) for the care she received after being diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia in 2009.

"I got extraordinary care there. They saved my life," said Mrs. Tonry, of Robbinsville in Mercer County. With the help of about a dozen other quilters, she has donated more than 250 quilts to patients at RWJ with leukemia, lymphoma and other blood disorders through her nonprofit organization, Quilts for Comfort.

"My doctors were brilliant and the nursing staff was spectacular," she said. "I am so fortunate to have had the best care available to me close to home."

Mrs. Tonry, 45, is just one of the many success stories at the Blood and Marrow Transplant Program, which recently marked its 1,000th transplant. Launched in 1995 in collaboration with Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey, the program is one of only two of its kind in New Jersey, drawing patients from throughout the tri-state region. Stem cell and bone marrow transplants are performed for patients with a variety of illnesses, including acute and chronic leukemias, myelodysplasia, various types of lymphoma, Hodgkin's disease, multiple myeloma, amyloidosis and related diseases.

"Every one of the 1,000 transplants is unique. Every one of those recipients is their own version of a hero with courage," said Roger Strair, MD, PhD, Director, Blood and Marrow

Transplant Program, and Chief of Hematologic Malignancies and Blood and Marrow Transplantation at Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey and a Professor of Medicine at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. "Susan's story is absolutely amazing; it is one of the most remarkable stories in the history of our program or anywhere."

Mrs. Tonry was first diagnosed with leukemia in January 2009. A 39-year-old, working full time as a CPA in public finance and caring for three young children, she wasn't too surprised when she first started feeling very weak and exhausted.

"I thought I was just overstressed and run down," she said.

After prompting from work colleagues, she went to see her doctor, Joseph Guarino, DO, a family practitioner in Hamilton. Lab tests showed she had acute myeloid leukemia, a cancer of the blood in which the body produces too many of certain types of white blood cells. Dr. Guarino referred Mrs. Tonry to Dr. Strair who immediately admitted her to RWJ. She underwent several months of chemotherapy treatment to try to induce a remission. Although she was feeling better after the chemotherapy, the leukemia returned in December 2009.

Dr. Strair then recommended a bone marrow transplant, which was performed in February 2010, to help boost her immune system to attack the leukemia.

Mrs. Tonry returned home after a few weeks but in September that year began experiencing "unbearable" back pain caused by a leukemia mass on her spine. She underwent radiation treatment to relieve the pain and had a transfusion of T-cells in January 2011.

By spring 2011, she was having "debilitating" leg and hip pain due to another mass within the spine. Attempts at injecting chemotherapy into her spine were unsuccessful so she began radiation. During this time, her body stopped making blood. She lost her motor skills and was unable to eat or walk. Her weight dropped to 89 pounds. She began writing goodbye notes to her children and a priest administered last rites.

At home with nursing care, Mrs. Tonry became severely anemic, causing pain in her head whenever she moved. She returned to RWJ overnight for several blood transfusions to replenish her red blood cells and relieve her pain. Following these transfusions, her body slowly and unexpectedly began to make blood again. She began physical therapy to regain her motor skills and gradually became stronger and gained weight throughout 2012. Over the past two years, she has returned to see Dr. Strair for regular check-ups and has remained cancer free.

"It's a true tribute to her strength that she put up with the incredibly intense and debilitating treatment. She endured what few

*Shown: Quilts for Comfort volunteers sew quilts that are hand-delivered to cancer patients at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital.*



could and now has a fantastic quality of life," said Dr. Strair.

"My original goal was just to make it to see my daughter's eighth grade graduation a year after my diagnosis," Mrs. Tonry said. "Not only did I see her eighth grade graduation but her graduation from high school as well and I was able to see her off to college last fall. I am so grateful for all that Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital has given to me."

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