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Gala prize turns into special gift

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It seemed like many another charity galas -- well-dressed and well-heeled people raising money to fight cancer. In the audience were three couples who had been raising money for the Cancer Research Foundation of North Texas and vying for the coveted title of Mr. and Ms. Silver Spurs. The couple that raised the most money would win the crown -- along with a luxury cruise, an added bonus but not the motive for the competition.

The partiers at the Silver Spurs Gala in October had enjoyed cocktails and dinner and were waiting for a live concert starring country western singer Tracy Lawrence when the nominees were being introduced.

As the names of the runners up were revealed -- they collectively had raised \$26,225 -- there were cheers from around the room when it became clear that Scott and Aimee Slover, who had raised \$10,000 for the foundation, would be named the winners.

But it wasn't until Scott Slover told everyone about their lives during Aimee's own struggles with cancer, and what the couple had decided what to do with their prize, that the crowd realized what a special night it would be.

A lingering illness

The Slover's journey to that night began in May 2007 when Aimee, the mother of four, was planning to celebrate her 1-year-old twins' birthday. Then 33 years old, Aimee had felt rundown since the twins were born, but had shrugged it off to the demands of her busy life.

Aimee, who worked at FedEx at the time, eventually had blood work done and was shocked when her doctor told her that she had acute myeloid leukemia and that treatment had to begin immediately.

Over the next seven months Aimee endured four rounds of rigorous chemotherapy while her doctors talked about a stem cell transplant. Neither of Aimee's siblings, typically considered by doctors to be the best donors, were a suitable but a match was found -- a young woman from Houston.

Preparations for a bone marrow transplant were being made when the rigorous chemotherapy regimen paid off and her cancer went into remission. For a while, life returned to normal. Then, on Christmas Eve 2008, Aimee began to feel sick again and a diagnosis less than a month later confirmed what the couple feared most: her cancer had returned.

Doctors again prepared her for a bone marrow transplant, eventually subjecting Aimee to a double dose of grueling chemotherapy that kept her in the hospital until March. She was allowed to go home briefly, only to return in April for more chemotherapy and three days of full body radiation treatments. By the day before Good Friday 2009, Aimee was ready to go.

As the nurse hung the transfusion bag full of the stem cells that she hoped would save her life, someone handed her an Easter Card and a handwritten, personal, but anonymous message of encouragement from the most important person in Aimee's life at that moment -- her donor.

It would be more than a year before Aimee would meet her donor, Kim Saucedo.

Joined for life

Kim almost entered Aimee's life -- literally -- two years earlier.

She was identified as the matching anonymous donor the first time Aimee's doctors considered a bone marrow transplant in 2007. She underwent additional blood testing and learned she was an excellent match only to be told later that the patient was going with another path of treatment.

When she was contacted again in 2009 and asked if she was still willing to be a donor, Kim said she was saddened to learn that the recipient from two years ago -- all she knew about the patient was age, gender and type of cancer -- had seen her cancer return. She was ready to help.

Kim -- now 29 and married and living in Stephenville -- readily agreed to go through the preparation process.

"I had 5 days of injections to stimulate stem cell production along with blood tests, a chest X-ray and EKG," Kim said. As her stem cells multiplied in her blood stream, she felt achy and a little tired -- an expected symptom.

On the day of the procedure, Kim was hooked up to a machine for six hours that drew her blood from one arm and sifted out her stem cells before returning that blood to her body via the other arm.

Insisting there were no heroics involved, Saucedá said it was no big deal. "I played in a church softball game the next night," she said.

But Kim did feel a need to send the Easter card along with her stem cell donation that included this printed message -- "For nothing is impossible with God." (Luke 1:37) -- along with a personal note of encouragement that included other scripture passages.

Kim felt that she was called -- that God was in charge of the situation -- and that it was no coincidence that all this was happening at Easter. "Easter is all about new life and resurrection, and I felt God was using me to give new life to someone who needed it," she said.

Kim and Aimee continued to exchange cards and messages through the anonymous system set up by the National Bone Marrow Donor program for over a year before their identities were revealed. They finally met face-to-face in October 2010, when the Saucedás drove to Arlington and spent most of the day with not only the Slovers but also got acquainted with their parents, children -- the entire family.

The two women continued to keep in touch.

So the Saucedás weren't surprised when the Slovers asked them to attend the Silver Spurs gala last October.

Paying it forward

Rewind to October 2009. Still weak from her two-year struggle with cancer and the aftermath of the transplant, Aimee and her husband were invited to the Silver Spurs Gala in October 2009 by their friends, Carl and Lisa Cravens.

Silver Spurs, which began in 1989, is a western-themed fundraiser benefiting the Cancer Research Foundation of North Texas. The money that is raised fund grants for cancer research. Since it began, the event has raised \$2,644,754.

Little did they know, however, that the Cravens had secretly decided to take their prize, if they were named Mr. and Ms. Silver Spurs, and give the Caribbean cruise to their friends the Slovers. They presented it to them, tearfully, in front of a large crowd.

Now, two years later, it was the Slovers who stood in front of the audience after being named Mr. and Mrs. Silver Spurs and announced they would give away their trip. "Aimee and I thought about giving the trip back to Carl and Lisa if we won," Scott Slover said. "But we decided to do something else with it."

Aimee had decided to give the trip to her donor, Kim Saucedá and her husband, Noel.

"I could never ever repay Kim for what she did for me," said Aimee Slover. "But at least this was a way to give back to her the week she lost giving me the transplant."

The Saucedás walked sheepishly to the stage to accept their prize, surprised to be receiving such a generous gift with Kim insisting that no repayment was necessary. The plan to take the cruise next year to celebrate their fifth wedding anniversary.

Grateful for being given the trip, and for an experience that brought her new friends, Kim later said the real payday came when she learned that two people at her church had decided to become donors after they heard about her experience.

And for Aimee the gala and the gift she gave the Saucedás let her finally feel that her ordeal was over.

"You know, I think it was that Saturday night at Silver Spurs. That sort of put a bow on it."

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