

Life

Super siblings are lifesavers

As bone marrow donors, Vancouver brother, sister share burden of cancer

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Luke Jensen, 8, and his siblings Jake, 11, and Tori, 6, take a moment from wrestling and joking around to pose for a photo in Luke's hospital room at Doernbecher Children's Hospital Wednesday July 15, 2009. Luke, who is being treated for leukemia, has received two bone marrow transplants from his siblings. (Matt Buxton/The Columbian)

Luke, Tori and Jake Jensen laughed and squabbled as they played.

"Jake taught me this," Luke said.

He stuck his hand in his armpit and flapped his elbow to make squelching noises.

Typical sibling behavior, even though the circumstances were anything but typical.

They were crowded into Luke's room at Doernbecher Children's Hospital in Portland, where the 8-year-old was wrapping up a second round of treatment for leukemia.

Tori, 6, donated bone marrow this time around. Jake, 11, did so a year ago.

The procedure entails general anaesthesia and poking a long needle into the hip bone to collect bone marrow.

"It didn't hurt," Jake said. "He's my brother, and I just want him to make it through cancer."

Tori nodded her head in agreement. Her mother, Vikki, said the girl woke up from her procedure singing to herself, "I'm a donor, and I feel good, and it didn't hurt."

Luke bears a heavy burden for someone so young, but so do Tori and Jake. Theirs is just different. It's a burden that's getting attention right now with "My Sister's Keeper" in movie theaters. In the movie, based on a book by Jodi Picoult, a couple conceives a third child to be a bone-marrow donor for their daughter who has leukemia.

It's not a movie the Jensens will see. They've been so absorbed in helping Luke that they're barely aware of the movie, other than friends telling them to avoid it.

"It is a difficult movie," said Amanda Goetz, spokeswoman for SuperSibs! The Chicago-area organization, which offers support to siblings of kids with cancer, doesn't recommend that its families see the movie. But the group encourages others to watch.

"It will help them understand the sibling journey," Goetz said. "(Cancer) is affecting the brothers and sisters just as much as it's affecting the patient."

SuperSibs! sees itself as an answer to the question posed by many siblings of kids with cancer: "Hey, what about me?"

The organization started out just serving families in the Midwest. Now in its sixth year, SuperSibs! serves 17,000 kids nationwide, including Tori and Jake Jensen, by mailing newsletters and pick-me-ups.

"Every once in a while, they send us little gifts. Just little things to make us feel appreciated, to make us feel important," Jake said. He and his sister have received trophies and charms.

"It's never been anything spendy, but it's meaningful," said their dad, Steve Jensen, a principal at King's Way Christian Schools in Vancouver.

The family has united against a common enemy — acute myeloid leukemia — since Luke first came down with a cold he

couldn't shake in 2007.

"When Luke was first getting chemo, seeing that poison going into his body, I felt like I could be physically sick," Vikki said. "It was so horrible."

A nurse told her to think of the chemo as a powerful weapon.

"You jump into a whole new realm of what you have to do," Vikki said.

That was the realm they were in when they asked Luke's siblings to donate bone marrow. Vikki and Steve didn't have the option of donating. Parents have only a 1 in 200 chance of being a match, but siblings have a 25 percent chance. So the Jensens could either put Luke on a transplant list and wait, or turn to their other two children.

Both were matches. Jake was the oldest, and wanted to help his brother, so he underwent the procedure the first time.

"Even though it was difficult and scary, it was the fight, it was what we had to do," Vikki said.

At Luke's one-year follow-up after his first round of treatment, screening turned up an abnormal cell.

"This time around, we haven't seen Luke sick with cancer," Steve said.

Which isn't to say they didn't see him suffer. Doctors launched an assault of chemotherapy and radiation treatments to drive errant cells from Luke's body before adding healthy bone marrow from his sister. Luke had to stay in the hospital for a month-and-a-half afterward.

His family was with him most of the time, which meant the other two kids missed some school.

"We can try to pretend things are normal, or we can realize this isn't normal and go through this together," Steve said. "It didn't make sense to pretend this didn't happen."

Even though he's out of the hospital, Luke can't go in public or enjoy the usual summertime kid stuff because of his compromised immune system. So his family plays Uno Spin, his favorite game of the moment.

The family doesn't like to discuss odds.

"We're still in the stage of taking things one day at a time," Vikki said. "Regardless, God is with us. We know without Him, we couldn't do it."
