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Life & Style

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Tuesday, May 22, 2007

'A chance I was willing to take'

Holland native shares her battle with scleroderma in Reader's Digest

Emily Nitz Woods, a 1988 West Ottawa High graduate, was confronted with a life-threatening disease in 1999. The U.S. National Champion Horse rider and record-holding springboard diver was eventually so crippled she needed 24-hour care.

It started with rings being snug and slightly swollen ankles. After going to several doctors, she finally found out what was causing her discomfort. It was scleroderma, a connective-tissue auto-immune disease that attacks the body, and in severe cases, can attack the organs and become fatal.

Unfortunately, about six months after Emily had her daughter Emma in Sept. 2002, the scleroderma progressed rapidly. Her skin became tight, her joints were stiffer and daily tasks were becoming a challenge. Her disease was also starting to affect her organs (lungs, heart and esophagus).

"I was stiff like a statue, and could barely walk," she said. "I was unable to feed or take care of myself ... My family and daughter gave me the energy and motivation to fight and survive."

Standard medications weren't working, and every day was a fight to stay alive.

"I didn't want Emma to grow up without a mother," Woods said. "By the beginning of 2004, I knew if I didn't do something drastic, my life would soon end. I read an article about stem-cell transplants at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in

FEATURED ADVERTISER



Emily Nitz Woods sits with her family in a picture taken around 2000. From left are her mom Joanne, Holland dentist Dr. Don Nitz, Emily and her brother Kryn, who graduated from West Ottawa High in 1984.

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Chicago, and thought even though there were risks involved, having the procedure was a chance I was willing to take."

Stem cells from her own body were withdrawn from the bloodstream and preserved while she underwent chemotherapy to destroy the immune cells thought to be causing scleroderma. Her own stem cells were then reintroduced into the bloodstream to restore her immune system. After seven months of kidney dialysis, not only did her kidneys start healing, but she also noticed her skin softening and her joints moving more easily.

She says the procedure saved her life.

She still has daily challenges and her hands remain curled and disfigured, but she can function independently and take care of her 4-year-old daughter. They currently live in Plano, Texas.

Woods' challenges and experiences have now inspired her to start an inspirational greeting card company called Dream On Media. She hand-decorates each card and writes inspiring messages inside. Her Web site, dreamonmedia.com, has pictures and more detailed information. A percentage of the proceeds of each card sale will go to the Scleroderma Foundation to help find a cure for this debilitating disease.

"I feel so blessed to have found something I can do to help support my daughter, as well as give back to the foundation and help raise awareness," Woods said. "I found a happy ending to my story."

Emily's story has been published in the June issue of Readers Digest, out now, and discusses in more detail the remarkable battle she has had. To find out more about scleroderma, visit www.scleroderma.org.-- Contributed story

What is scleroderma?

It's a chronic, often progressive autoimmune disease -- like rheumatoid arthritis, lupus and multiple sclerosis -- in which the body's immune system attacks its own tissues.

The disease, which can literally mean "hard skin," can cause thickening and tightening of the skin, as well as serious damage to internal organs ... Scleroderma occurs three to four times more often in women than in men.

For some individuals, scleroderma is a nuisance. For others, it's a life-threatening disease. For most people with scleroderma, the disease has a serious impact on daily life. And although medications can sometimes help, there is no cure yet.

-- Scleroderma Foundation



This recent photo shows one of Emily Nitz Wood's hands, which were left "curled and disfigured" by scleroderma.



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