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Plano

Plano woman makes greeting cards inspired by struggle against disease

Plano: Woman produces greeting cards inspired by personal struggle

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By ALICIA M. COLLIER / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

Sitting in her Plano living room, Emily Nitz Woods speaks slowly and deliberately about her long road and how it led her into the greeting and inspirational card business.

Ms. Woods has survived a risky stem-cell transplant to combat scleroderma, a chronic autoimmune disease that hardens the skin. It can be life-threatening if it attacks internal organs.

Ms. Woods' emotional struggles prompted her to display the word "believe" prominently in silver block letters in her living room. Her cards are a means of spreading the positive message.

Ms. Woods' life changed dramatically in 1999, when she was 29. She had poor circulation, stiff joints and tightening skin. Then she received the diagnosis: scleroderma.

About 300,000 Americans have the disease. At first, she could function normally, but with limited range of motion. But her symptoms worsened about four months after the birth of her daughter, Emma, in 2002.

"By the end of 2003, I couldn't feed myself. My skin was so tight that my elbows wouldn't bend," she remembered.

Instead of being inconvenienced by scleroderma, she was becoming disabled. She required assistance dressing and walking. She and her husband, Kevin, hired a full-time nanny to care for Emma.

Her physical decline continued despite traditional drug therapy. She turned to the Internet to research options.

"Even though I wanted to educate myself, it was depressing and so it was kind of a Catch-22," she said.

She knew enough of the disease to know what lay ahead. And she saw her symptoms worsening week by week. The worst part was her inability to care for Emma.

"I didn't want her to grow up without a mother," Ms. Woods said.

Her research led her to Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago, where she received the transplant as a last-ditch effort.

The stem cells were drawn from her bone marrow and preserved while she received chemotherapy. Then, the stem cells were transfused. Temporary kidney failure caused a delay in her return home and prolonged the separation from her

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NAN COULTER/Special Contributor

A skin disease made it impossible for Emily Nitz Woods to care for her daughter, Emma. In greeting cards, Ms. Woods conveys the thoughts that helped her overcome the ordeal. 'I wanted something to relay the emotions I went through,' she says.

"I just felt so isolated from the life I knew before," she said.

As a student, she was a record-holding springboard diver. As a young adult, she was a champion horse rider. Because of the disease, she needed help with basic tasks.

But the transplant was a turning point. Within six months, there was vast improvement.

During occupational therapy and healing, she discovered a need to find meaning in her survival.

"I wanted something to relay the emotions I went through, the things I've learned – that there is hope and not to give up," she said.

Dream On Media was born. Ms. Woods shares her thoughts in greeting and inspirational cards.

"They are meant to inspire and encourage," she said. "I wanted something I could sell and give back to the [Scleroderma] Foundation and hopefully find a cure."

Now, she and her husband are divorced, and she's a single mom caring for Emma. Her hands are slightly curled, and her limbs have a purplish cast. But with softened skin and a renewed ability to get around unaided, she is optimistic.

"I think that frame of mind has a dramatic effect on your situation. If you live it, believe in it and think it, you can help that process along. I feel that has helped me get to where I am today."

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TO LEARN MORE

Greeting cards

- The greeting cards of Emily Nitz Woods are found exclusively at www.dreamonmedia.com.
- Birthday cards, thank-you notes and cards of encouragement are available.
- A portion of the proceeds are given to the Scleroderma Foundation to aid research for a cure and to educate and support those suffering from the disease.

Scleroderma

- Scleroderma is a chronic autoimmune disorder causing hardening of the skin.
- Little is known about how the disease is contracted, but it involves the overproduction of collagen; medicines treat the underlying symptoms, depending on which organ is affected; there is no cure.
- Visit the Scleroderma Foundation Web site, www.scleroderma.org.