

# Simple Acts of Kindness

Kevin Penn, BA, MBA

**H**ello, my name is Kevin Penn and I am 41 years old. When asked to describe who I am, many labels come to mind. I am a husband to Kristin—my soul mate and love of my life—father of two young boys, Oliver (age 6) and Elliot (age 4), as well as a brother, son, friend, coworker, executive at a public company, and a bicycling enthusiast. Those labels, and maybe a few others, largely define who I am. I also happen to be a leukemia survivor. As a result, this makes me a representative of the thousands of patients with cancer that you see and treat on a regular basis.



Photo courtesy of Kevin Penn. Used with permission.

Kevin Penn with his family during a hiking excursion in the summer of 2012.

I became that representative when I was diagnosed with acute myelogenous leukemia (AML) on May 29, 2008, at the age of 37. After six months of intensive treatments, including many long hospital stays and only a few months of recovery, I, unfortunately, relapsed. Given how tenacious my leukemia was proving to be, I earned a trip to Duke University Medical Center's adult bone marrow transplantation program, where I underwent a stem cell transplantation in 2009. I was very

fortunate to have a matched donor in my brother.

Words cannot come close to describing how extremely tough those 18 months were for my family and for me. We were frightened, we were angry, and we were hopeful. Conveying how hellacious that treatment process was is nearly impossible, but, as I sat down to write this article, the analytical side of me took

hold and I thought I could convey the treatment through the numbers. Here is what one AML diagnosis can equal: 52 high-dosage chemotherapy treatments, 11 bone marrow biopsies, 114 days in the hospital, 121 days of clinic visits, 10 total body irradiation treatments, 15 gray of irradiation absorbed by my body, 5,672 pills ingested, 1,327 blood tests, 67 blood/platelet bags transfused, 70 microbiology tests, one year of chronic graft-versus-host disease issues, 61 days of neutropenia, 34 radiology procedures, 10,450 mg of prednisone, 198 complete blood count tests, and 9 million stem cells collected from my brother.

All of this wasn't very pleasant, of course. But I suppose one of the things you don't realize before you become an AML survivor is that it's not all horrible and dark. In fact, looking back, I have

many positive memories. Memories I'm going to cherish for the rest of my life. And most of them, perhaps even all of them, are because of the individual acts of kind-

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ness I experienced from friends, family, and my medical caregivers. In the end, it's not the 31st x-ray or the 38th chemotherapy bag or the 300th blood test that I'm going to remember years from now; it's the acts of kindness. Perhaps the most significant, most lasting, and certainly the most inspiring part of a medical professional's job is not what was learned in school or what was read in a book; instead, it is those small, unscripted, unexpected acts of kindness that really matter.

These gestures, which came from so many, meant so much.

- Displaying a warm and knowing smile at 2 am while hanging a bag of chemotherapy—an event that I dreaded from the first to the last bag.
- Taking care of my wife and family as if they were patients, too, making sure that their own fight was taken into consideration.
- Making as little noise as possible when walking into the room in the wee hours of the morning to allow me and my family to rest.

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