



ERIN'S UPDATE

# Gossip and girl talk—yes, about cancer

In November 2001, *Glamour* assistant editor Erin Zammatt, 24, was diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukemia (CML), a cancer that until recently proved fatal in most cases. But a new drug called Gleevec is changing the future for CML patients—in fact, Erin's been doing so well on Gleevec that some days she almost forgets she's a cancer patient. Almost.

## OCTOBER 18, 2002 Leukemia reunion

I'm not really a support-group type of person—I thought hanging out with cancer patients would just make me feel more like one myself. But tonight I had dinner with Jennifer Gangloff, Paige Brown and Suzan McNamara, three CML patients who were featured in *Glamour's* December 2001 issue. The article followed these three young women as they endured painful chemotherapy treatments, awful side effects and the horror of facing death.

Then came Gleevec, the miracle drug that's helping so many CML patients control their disease—without making them sick; most people feel little more than some fatigue and muscle cramps. Within days of taking the pills, all three women were feeling better and on the road to remission. I still can't get over the coincidence: The December issue hit newsstands the day I was diagnosed. I read the story on the way home from my first oncologist appointment.

I was a little nervous before I met the women, afraid they might resent me because I didn't have to endure the harsh treatments and painful side effects they all did (I was able to start on Gleevec right away). But I was wrong about all of that. It was such a relief to talk about CML with other CML patients. We were like four girlfriends out on the town—drinking martinis, flirting with the waiter (OK, that was me), gossiping for hours. Only we

weren't talking about our boyfriends, we were talking about our cancer.

Everyone's experience has been different. Suzan, a student from Montreal, had been on interferon treatments—really intense chemotherapy—and near death. Now, thanks to Gleevec, she's in molecular remission (basically, her cells show no sign of leukemia). "I'm no longer Suzan Leukemia, I'm just Suzan," she says. "I can conquer just about anything now. I've faced death, and nothing is scarier than that." Suzan is 36. She's planning to get her Ph.D. in medical research and hopes to find new therapies for other forms of leukemia. "Not everyone is lucky enough to have Gleevec," she says.

Paige, an executive producer at the CBS affiliate in Nashville, Tennessee, is 35. Two years ago, she was also extremely ill—but today she is taking Gleevec and doing great. Now she helps raise funds and awareness for the Leukemia & Lym-

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phoma Society and counsels newly diagnosed patients. "I try to do as much as I can," she says, "so that my experience won't have been for nothing."

Jennifer, who's also 35, works as a journalist for mayoclinic.com. She reached molecular remission with Gleevec about six months ago but decided to stop taking the drug last July. Her doctors advised against it, but she had unusually heavy side effects and wanted to see if the remission would hold without the drug (there was no evidence that it would). "I'd been in treatment for CML for nearly three years, including some awful times on interferon. I was hoping I'd reached the point where I could put this behind me," she said.



Sadly, after just three months of being off the drug, Jennifer's leukemia has come back and appears to be moving fast. In August, zero percent of her cells showed leukemia. As of today, 28 percent do. She plans to go back on Gleevec right away and hopes to beat the leukemia once again. But even with the recent setback, she has an incredible attitude: "When I was diagnosed with cancer, I

never wondered, Why me? After all, why *shouldn't* it have been me? I'm not so special that I should be immune to cancer while others, including little babies and my own grandmother, get it. Yeah, I get sick of having CML and all the problems it brings. But if it was my sister or mother or another loved one, I'd be saying, 'Why couldn't it have been me?'"

We stayed at the restaurant for five hours, talking about our doctors, our families, the future of our treatment. We compared blood counts and side effects like old ladies: "Bone pain? Not me, but let me tell you about my indigestion!" I realized that there *are* cancer patients I can relate to. These three women feel lucky to be alive but still sweat the small stuff sometimes. Because even with cancer, they're only human.

OCTOBER 25, 2002  
**I'm going to be an aunt!**

My older sister, Melissa, is pregnant—she found out a few weeks ago on our family vacation. All she has ever wanted is to be a mother. She used to pretend to breast-feed her Cabbage Patch Kids and has had baby names picked out since she could talk. She's only four weeks pregnant, but she wants the world to know and is already walking around with her hand on her belly. She says she's nauseated and exhausted and told me, "You have no idea what I'm going through." My mom and I agreed that Melissa would have died on the spot if *she* were the one diagnosed with leukemia. But we're all really excited for her.

I have to admit, though, all the baby talk is a tough reminder that I may never be a mom. A bone marrow transplant and Gleevec, my two foreseeable treatment options, both make pregnancy risky or impossible. I'm still weighing my options, including freezing embryos. Melissa wants me to hurry up and get pregnant so our kids can be friends, but I can't even think about any of that until I'm in remission. Who knows when—or if—that will happen?

A few days ago, I was at Memorial Sloan-Kettering for my regular blood test and got really upset. It's a simple test, but I just don't feel like I belong in that waiting room. I sat next to an old man and pretended to read a magazine. Looking around the room, I wondered if peo-

ple thought he was my grandpa and that I was his healthy granddaughter along for support. But when the phlebotomist called my name, the fantasy ended. I was just a cancer patient like everyone else.

OCTOBER 31, 2002  
**Facing the future**

It's Halloween, and my mom and I are heading to Portland, Oregon, for yet another bone marrow biopsy. (I'm participating in a clinical drug trial that's based in Portland, so I go out there for tests every few months.) This is my third time flying with my needles—injections are part of my treatment—and I have yet to be stopped by security. I've had my laptop searched and my tweezers confiscated, but no one's batted an eye at the 12 syringes of chemotherapy that are wedged between the *Us Weekly*

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and the peanut M&M's in my carry-on. While our girls' night out two weeks ago was a blast, it reminded me that I *am* sick, that CML is more serious than I like to pretend sometimes. But I have three strong, smart new friends who remain incredibly positive about their futures. I only hope I can do the same. ©



*Walking with my boss, Alison—I'm so grateful for her support.*

*Me with Team Glamour at a Leukemia & Lymphoma Society walk.*

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