

“One year into my battle with leukemia, I’m winning”

In November 2001, *Glamour* assistant editor Erin Zammett, 25, was diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukemia (CML), a cancer that until recently proved fatal for most patients. For the last year, she has shared her daily experiences of dealing with the disease in this column. Fortunately, her treatment so far has been very effective. Through an Oregon-based clinical drug trial, Erin has been taking a lifesaving new medication called Gleevec, along with low doses of chemotherapy. Her disease seems manageable for now, and this will be the last regular installment of her cancer diary. But she'll continue to update *Glamour* readers on her progress until the day she is cured.

JANUARY 17, 2003

Today was officially my last day in the clinical trial. It's like I'm taking off my cancer training wheels, so I'm a little scared. I won't have two different doctors looking at my blood every other week, or

nurses e-mailing to see how I'm feeling, or all of them wanting to know about my every cough, hiccup and yawn anymore. I'm doing incredibly well—my blood levels are all normal, my chromosomes are all normal—but there is still some evidence of leukemia in my genes. My doctors are confident that my disease will soon be undetectable (not necessarily gone, but not discernable by even the most sensitive tests), hopefully by my next biopsy at the end of March. Then I can relax a little. Gleevec has been around for only five years, so data is incomplete on what constitutes remission. For now, I'm continuing with the treatment that has worked so well for me (four Gleevec pills every day and nightly injections of Ara-C, a chemotherapy drug, for two out of every four weeks). The idea is to phase out the Ara-C and control the CML with the Gleevec alone. I could potentially be taking Gleevec for the rest of my life. But no one—not the best doctors and certainly not me—knows what to expect.

Even if I am cured one day, cancer will always be part of my life.

JANUARY 30

I turned 25 today. Dr. Mauro, my Oregon oncologist, let me postpone my next round of Ara-C injections so I could have a chemo-free birthday. (Because I'm not following the strict trial protocol anymore, we can be a lot more flexible.) I feel OK when I'm taking just the Gleevec, but the Ara-C totally zaps my energy. I've been

doing the injections for over a year now, and they haven't gotten any easier. I know a few diabetics, and they all say to me, "Doesn't it just get so easy after a while?" I'll agree with them, laughing about giving myself shots while watching *The Bachelorette* or talking on the phone. But I'm lying. I suck at it. Sometimes I jab too fast and the needle pops right back out, or I accidentally let

go of the needle and it dangles from my leg or stomach like I'm a heroin addict. Other times it just hurts, and I get mad that I have to do this to myself.

I won't be writing a regular column about my leukemia anymore, and I'm no longer in a fancy, high-profile trial; suddenly I'm just a regular cancer patient.



Me, sharing a little glamour with sick kids at Brooklyn Hospital



My friend Karen Travers is running a marathon for leukemia.

KAREN PEARSON

Rather than getting Gleevec sent to me by the government, I pick it up at CVS when I get my birth control. Since this all started, I've felt as if having cancer made me special (granted, in a way that no one wants to be special), but picking up a prescription after scanning the aisles of a drugstore for brown waterproof mascara is totally ordinary.

■ ■ ■ FEBRUARY 20

I had a massage last night at a trendy New York City spa, a haven of relaxation for the rich and famous. It should have been pure bliss, but I was a little thrown off by the orientation form: In the section that lists the ailments and afflictions you need to disclose before your treatment, I had to check off *cancer*. I felt strangely proud—because I look so good and feel so good, all while battling cancer—and was half hoping one of the other women there would look over my shoulder and say, “*You* have cancer? I don’t believe it!” But it was also another sad realization for me. No matter how fine I look and feel, it doesn’t change the fact that I have leukemia. And even if I am cured one day, cancer will always be part of my life. When you’re 25, you don’t often think of anything being permanent, but cancer is forever.

■ ■ ■ FEBRUARY 27

I’ve been feeling a little sorry for myself lately, which is not like me. I hate that I’m so tired. I hate wondering if a cough is just a cough, if that bump behind my ear is a pimple or lymphoma. I hate having to plan nights out with my friends around my injection cycle and never being able to have more than two drinks (the occasional boozefest was my one precancer vice, and I miss it!). But at the same time that I complain about the burden this has put on my life, I’m so grateful to have a life to complain about. When you have cancer, there’s a fine line between feeling sorry for yourself and feeling damn lucky.

One thing that gives meaning to this whole cancer thing is all the fund-raising I’ve done, plus the speaking to raise awareness of blood-related cancers. Since I was diagnosed, I’ve thrown a lot of parties, bringing my friends together to drink for a good cause. It’s been easy and fun, and we’ve raised more than \$40,000 to date. Today, though, I did something different: I went to Brooklyn Hospital and hung out with patients on the pediatric ward. They were all girls, ranging in age from three to



Visiting Pia Awal, a new friend, during her chemo treatment

17. Some had leukemia, some had other diseases; some were very sick, others were in remission. I told them I have leukemia and that I take very good medicine and feel great and can still go to work at my very cool job. Then we played with makeup and did manicures and ate cupcakes and talked and laughed. It was a lot more difficult than schmoozing at a fundraiser with a martini in my hand, but it was worth it. The kids had a blast, but I think it meant more to me than to them. Today I felt lucky.

People always say to me, “So I guess you have the good kind of cancer, huh?” For now, I have to agree. It’s a really good cancer—my treatment is easy, I feel great and the drugs are working—but if I’m dead in 10 years, it won’t have been a very good kind of cancer, will it?

I often think about what my life would be like now if I’d never gotten cancer. The truth doesn’t sound so spectacular, because in many ways my life would be exactly the same. In my first column, in May 2002, I wrote, “Life is cancer; the rest is just details.” One year later, that couldn’t be further from the truth. With Gleevec, my life is not all about cancer. Sure, without the disease my daily traumas would probably be more about men and sex and less about bone marrow biopsies, but for better or worse, I haven’t changed. At first I felt I had failed the disease because I didn’t have the totally new perspective on life that I thought all cancer patients did. I felt guilty

for not living every day to the fullest, for not having spiritual breakthroughs and for getting stressed out about stupid stuff—gaining a pound, my sister taking my jeans, my boyfriend not knowing

where he wants to go for dinner. But now I’m grateful for my type-A ways—and I’m using them. I’ve always prided myself on being able to roll with the punches and make lemonade from lemons. My experience with cancer lets me do that on a much larger scale. I have a clear purpose, an outlet for all my energy. I now know that an e-mail, a phone call or even a smile can really make a difference

in someone’s life. It sounds like a cancer cliché, but my life now really is better than it was before I was diagnosed. Sure, my disease is sad and overwhelming at times, but the more money I raise, the more patients I connect with, the less helpless I feel. My doctors, my family, everyone around me believes I can beat this—and so do I. ©

There’s a fine line between feeling bad for yourself and feeling damn lucky.

What you can do

Help patients facing leukemia and other cancers by **joining the bone marrow donor registry** (go to themarrowfoundation.org for details), **running or walking a marathon** (go to leukemia-lymphoma.org to find an event near you) or **donating money for cancer research** (learn how at gpfoundation.com).

KAREN PEARSON