



JOE VEASEY

## One student's upbeat personality pulls friends and family through an emotional fight against cancer

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Reaching the 18th green looks out of the question. It's a Saturday in July and the sun is pounding 90-degree heat onto the Oakwood Club golf course. Joe Veasey reluctantly stops after the ninth hole. His boss at the golf course won't be happy. Joe works as a caddy during his summers and can normally make it through 36 holes in one day. But today, something feels different.

Joe, 21, hails from South Euclid, a suburb of Cleveland. His mother is from Peru, his father is a high school Spanish teacher, his older brother is in the Navy and his two sisters are in high school. The Veaseys are described by friends as a close, fun family.

Joe studies architecture at Miami University, where friends and professors are drawn to his never-ending good mood and always-joking personality. He served as a teaching assistant to architecture professor John Reynolds. "Joe comes with all the ingredients of a tremendous human being," Reynolds said. "He has all the qualities of a good teacher — kind, unselfish, patient."

Joe signed up to participate in Miami's Over-the-Rhine semester program where Miami architecture students live in the infamous downtown area of Cincinnati, take classes and help to rejuvenate building and structures in the area. But, Joe wasn't there when the fall semester began.

Joe started last summer with a carefree trip with high school friends to Hawaii to visit his good friend who

attends Chaminade University there. After the trip, Joe settled into his summer job carrying golf clubs on the links at the Oakwood Club in Cleveland. "I can go 36," Joe said. "But for the whole month I'd only been doing 18 and my boss was questioning me, ya know? What's wrong with you? You're such a slacker!"

The whole summer Joe felt as if something weren't right, but he always explained away how he was feeling. If he was tired it was because he hadn't gotten enough sleep or because of a long day carrying golf bags up fairways. If he was feeling weak it was because he had a cold or maybe a touch of the flu. "I had an excuse for everything. I thought I was dehydrated the whole time on the golf course," Joe said.

But Joe's general sluggishness showed no signs of relenting and strangely, no one else around him was getting sick, not even his girlfriend Lauren Hersch. "It almost instigated arguments between us because he would come over and just fall asleep everyday," Lauren said.

Lauren is a junior at Miami. Like Joe, she is studying architecture. They met at a party in November of Joe's junior year.

By the end of July, Joe's mystery illness spurred his mom to schedule a doctor's appointment. But that Saturday on the golf course when Joe decided to stop after nine holes he knew he needed to see the doctor

# THE MONO

## THAT WOULDN'T GO AWAY

right away. His boss, who had been joking with Joe about his constant tiredness, would just have to deal with it. "When I came in after the nine holes he knew I wasn't (messing) around. I went home immediately and I went to the doctor's," Joe said.

Joe told the doctor he'd been feeling tired for about a month.

"You've got mono," the doctor told Joe. "But I need you to get a blood test so we can make sure."

The mono explained everything — Joe's dogged tiredness — the occasional bouts of sickness. Mono can be passed by drinking from the same cup or kissing, yet Lauren had not been feeling any symptoms of mono, nor were family, friends or co-workers. "I said I hadn't been working out as much because I was always tired," Joe said. "The doctor said, 'Yeah, mono will do that to you.'"

So it was settled then: Joe had mono, the doctor was nearly certain. But that blood test was still needed to confirm the diagnosis.

The next day Joe took the blood test. "Actually right after the blood test I stood up, was dizzy, a little nauseous and threw up the orange juice I had that morning." It's nothing he told himself. "I got up too fast."

The doctors told Joe he was free to go home and said they would notify him when the test results came in. "So that afternoon I played golf...and after nine holes people were calling me saying you have to get home immediately, something's wrong with your blood. Just come home," Joe recalled.

When Joe walked into his house, he found his mom crying. She told him they had to go back to the hospital right away. Joe asked her what was wrong. He remembered hearing her say the word "cancer." Unable to process what she had said, he decided to jump in the shower. After all, he had just played nine sweaty holes of golf.

At the Cleveland Clinic, the doctors and nurses poked and prodded Joe. "They're not even talking to me — just poking me with needles. Eventually, I'm just like, 'OK, people, stop. Somebody explain what's going on here.' That's when it was explained that I had one of three things: super virus, leukemia, or something where your bone marrow is OK but it turns off," Joe said.

At that point, doctors told Joe they needed to keep him overnight do a bone marrow biopsy. That's when

he received his first blood transfusion. The next morning, Joe's doctors asked if he was feeling better. "I never felt bad in the first place so I don't know how I could feel better," Joe told them.

The next day Joe was diagnosed with acute myelogenous leukemia. It's a cancer that causes the body to produce an increased number of the white blood cells that normally help fight infection. The worst news was still to come.

Then it all started. A three-pronged IV was connected to Joe's chest. It entered his blood stream just above his heart, serving as a central line for treatments. This wasn't the first time Joe had a tube coming out of his chest. During Joe's senior year of high school his lung mysteriously collapsed. He hasn't had any problems with his lungs since.

His collapsed lung healed, but leukemia was going to be a different kind of battle. Denial was Joe's initial reaction to the news. Just a day before the doctor was certain it was mono. "That doesn't happen," Joe thought to himself. "People with leukemia don't have hair and sleep a lot."

Joe didn't realize it, but he had been sleeping a lot and his hair—well, it would be gone soon. His thin, soccer player frame was about to be pushed harder than ever before. His first round of chemotherapy started just three days after the initial blood test. "He'd sleep through (the chemotherapy)," Lauren said. "Towards the end of the first 10-day round he just slept more. He was just a lot weaker because it was starting to take effect. But, I mean, he still had his sense of humor."

The chemo had some unanticipated effects on Joe. His taste buds changed. He developed a craving for pickles, Stouffer's Macaroni and Beef and orange Powerade. Eventually the doctors told Joe he wasn't allowed to drink any more Powerade — it was putting too much potassium in his system.

His hair slowly disappeared, but Joe hardly noticed. People would ask if it bothered him. "I don't have any hair?" Joe would reply. He assumed he looked the same as always.

"One time I was looking in the mirror and I thought, 'You look ridiculous, you need to grow your hair back.' And that was it. It never bugged me," Joe said.

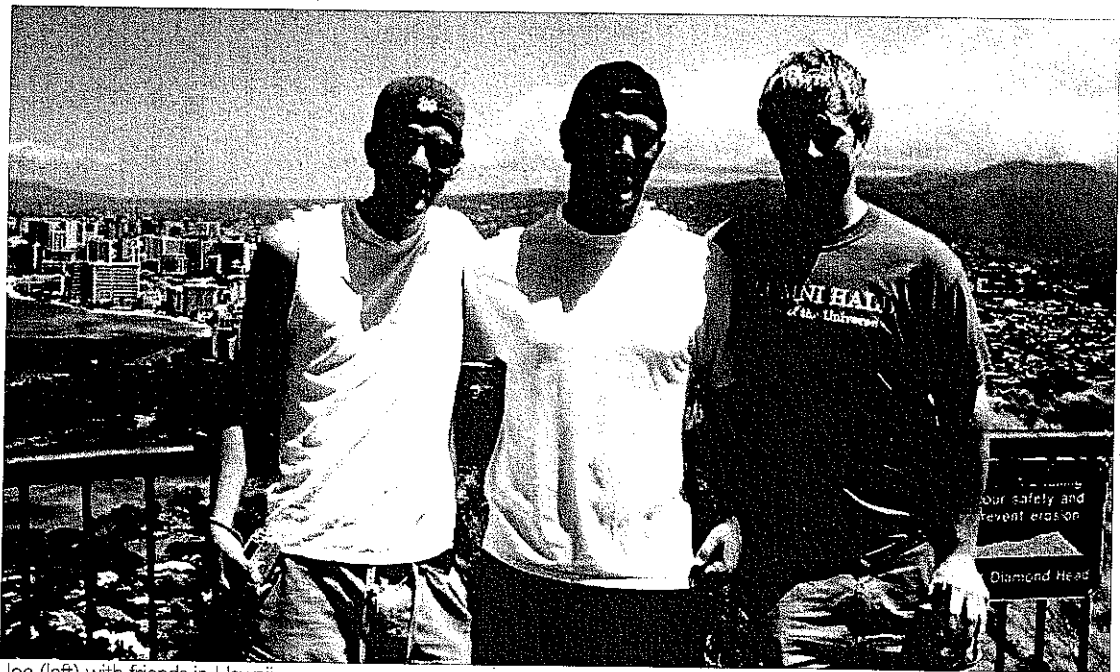
The success of the chemotherapy would determine the effectiveness of a bone marrow transplant. In the meantime, Joe's brother, John, requested a short leave from the Navy to come home, get tested and see if his bone marrow matched Joe's. His sisters Mary Rose, 14, and Katie, 17, were also tested. At the end of the first round of treatment, the doctors told Joe there was good news and bad. They started with the bad. "They told me that the first chemo didn't work. I remember that being the most emotional roller coaster because right after they told me the chemo didn't work they told me my sister was a match. You guys are jerks!" Joe remembers telling the doctors and laughs.

The first round of chemotherapy killed some leukemia cells, but not as many as the doctors were hoping. It was a bad sign, but there was hope for a successful bone marrow transplant now that a sibling was a match. The chances of a sibling being a match: one in four. Mary Rose was it. "I don't know how you wouldn't be terrified, but from what I heard she

Joe was awake and talking with people that afternoon. He called friends to share news of the transplant. Things were looking up and so was Joe. But it would take at least 30 days and a white blood cell count above 1,000 before Joe would know if the transplant was working.

He stayed on the pediatrics floor of Cleveland Clinic during the first 30 days of his hospital stay where he developed a reputation with the nurses as a prankster. "Their main medicine is laughter," Joe said of the nurses. "That's what's been getting me through this."

His high spirits and jokes in turn helped those around him through the ordeal. No one was safe from Joe's mischievous jokes in the hospital. Not his mom, not his girlfriend and not the nurses. "This heart monitor thing had a giant plug and I said to Lauren, 'Here help me unplug this thing!' So I held it here (by his side) and I knew it had some slack in it. She's pulling and I'm not really pulling back so it's not coming out," Joe explains.



Joe (left) with friends in Hawaii

jumped up and said, 'I'm gonna do it,'" Lauren said. "I think they made an arrangement where she doesn't have to buy Joe a present ever again."

Joe's doctors remained optimistic that the bone marrow transplant would graft inside his bones and start producing healthy white blood cells. "The kind of leukemia Joe has, the average (age) for it is 65, 70, so it's pretty rare for his age. If you look at survival rates, they can be deceiving because people that old can't handle chemo. So for someone like Joe who's 21, healthy, strong, it's bad, but it's definitely handleable," Lauren said.

The bone marrow transplant took place Sept. 8. Mary Rose went to Cleveland Clinic at 7 a.m. for the procedure. The doctors took a small amount of bone marrow from her hip. She was given painkillers and was back in school the next Monday.

"So then I let a little slack go and I go, 'OWWW!' like I was being electrocuted, she jumps like three feet and I am in my bed laughing like, 'You fell for it!'"

Being a comedian has always been a part of Joe's life, but now it is his most important role.

"I'm there for comedic relief when tensions get too high in the house," Joe said. "And it's like, 'Oh my God, there's going to be a fight,' and then Joe cracks a joke."

Another time Joe employed the hand sanitizer that nurses and doctors use in a prank. "They carry around alcohol, Purell, stuff like that in a can. To me, it looked like a can of Reddi Whip," Joe laughs. "I said to my friend Paul, 'What you gotta do is replace it with a can of Reddi Whip. I'll call the nurse and say I'm not feeling well and right before she comes in you just take the Reddi Whip and put your head underneath it and start devouring the Reddi Whip and she's (thinking) 'What is wrong with you?'"

But not every moment in the hospital was fun and games. He insisted on doing things himself. He refused to stay in bed when he had to go to the bathroom. "I said, 'No, you just explain what I have to do,'" Joe said.

Sometimes it would get complicated. He would have to unplug stuff like his heart monitor and IV every time he needed to get up. The hardest thing for Joe was not the treatment; it was being trapped in his hospital room. Joe was at Cleveland Clinic for 61 days, from July 31 to Sept. 29. "Things that made me feel bad was when people would say 'Oh, is it going to rain tomorrow? Damn.' I was like, 'You know what, you can hang out here it'll be nice and about 75. The air's a little dry, but I promise you, no rain.'"

He passed the time sleeping, talking with friends and family, and watching movies. He told his girlfriend he wanted a desk in his room. Always the hard worker, Joe figured he would enter an architecture competition to pass the time, but that never happened.

One frequent visitor was Joe's cousin, Michael Ausperk, a Catholic priest in Cleveland. "The thing is, like, after all this stuff that's happened, he's Mike. He's not Father Michael. Whenever he would come into my room with his, you know, collar and stuff, I would yell at him, 'Take that s\*\*t off. Don't try to hide behind that. Everybody here knows that you're just a normal human being. I'll hide behind my 'leuk' you hide behind your collar,'" Joe said, laughing. "Michael's been my best friend through this whole thing."

Weeks passed after the bone marrow transplant. Joe's white blood cell count fluctuated daily. One day it was up another it was down. "They think that some of (the new bone marrow) grafted because I am producing some of my own white blood cells," Joe said.

Three weeks after the transplant, Joe's doctors made a decision: the transplant had failed. He just wasn't producing enough good white blood cells. The chemotherapy had killed some of the bad cells, but not enough to make room for the new cells that were growing after the transplant. The doctors told Joe and his parents there was no more treatment to give him. They kept him on antibiotics to help combat bacteria for his failing immune system, but said another round of chemotherapy could kill him. Just 60 days after he played his last game of golf, a kid who was rarely ill was given the worst news of his life. Joe's cancer was now terminal.

"My dad was yelling at the doctors, 'How can you tell me—he's a perfectly healthy young man—something's wrong?'" Joe said.

The doctors discharged Joe Sept. 29, when the temperature was in the 40s. "It was cold. It felt like I was leaving an airport actually. It was like you know how when you've been on an airplane for so long, you come off someplace you've never been and smell the air and you smell differences. I'd been in a sterile environment for two months. Gasoline, you know what I mean, that was one of the things that hit my nose," Joe said.

Friends and family began learning the news from Joe that Friday and through the weekend. His friend Dan flew home from Hawaii. They decided to drive down to Miami to visit friends and hang out.

In early October, Joe returned to Miami's campus for the first time since the end of the spring semester. One of his first stops was the Bagel & Deli Shop Uptown. He spent time with Lauren, friends from freshman year and friends from the architecture program. He met with Professor Reynolds for dinner.

He decided to meet up with his freshman year buddies in front of the sundial overlooking central quad and McCracken Hall where girls were laying in the sun and guys were tossing a football. On a surprisingly warm October day, Joe and Dan crossed Spring Street and headed towards his friends, who were already there. He looked exactly the same as he had in the spring, but his hair was gone. As they smiled and went in for handshakes and hugs, Dan stopped them. Everyone has to use hand sanitizer before they can get close to Joe. Now it's OK to hug him. Friends ask how he's doing and if he can still get more treatment. Joe brings everyone up to speed, answers each question and laughs in between each funny story he tells about the hospital. He is the same old Joe. He made Dan speed the whole way to Miami. He figured if the police pulled them over he would say, "I have leukemia."

"Now I get to hide behind the 'leuk' card, ya know what I mean? Don't make me pull out my leuk card," Joe jokes.

Joe and his friends talked for nearly two hours on the brick wall overlooking the grassy quad before Joe had to meet Professor Reynolds Uptown. They all sanitize their hands again and say their goodbyes. Joe drives back to Cleveland that night; another blood transfusion awaits him there. He has to get new blood at least once a week now because his isn't producing enough of his own blood.

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*-graham wolfe*



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