

Ginny Marso

St. Cloud, Minnesota

Mother of Andy, Who Survived Meningococcal Disease

Ginny Marso was not alarmed when her son Andy, a senior at the University of Kansas, called to say he wasn't feeling well. Andy was three weeks shy of graduating from college and, in addition to finishing up his classes, had been busy writing for both a local weekly and for the school newspaper. When he called, he described suddenly beginning to feel "awful" and having a difficult time "getting warm" despite the beautiful spring day. Assuming her son was tired and run down, Ginny told him he most likely had the flu and to rest and stay hydrated.

The next morning, around 11:00 a.m., Andy's friend, Clay, who knew Andy wasn't feeling well, went to his room to check on him. What he found was a very lethargic and uncooperative young man who refused to move because his body ached so badly, his legs and arms covered with purple blotches. Clay and another friend carried Andy two floors down to the car and took him to the school health service where he was immediately seen by a doctor who suspected meningococcal disease. Andy was taken to the local hospital by ambulance where a spinal tap confirmed the diagnosis. An air ambulance took him to the University of Kansas Medical Center, about forty miles away in Kansas City.

Ginny's husband, Harry, received the first call from the health service, advising that Andy was extremely ill, probably with meningococcal disease, a potentially fatal bacterial infection that often strikes adolescents and young adults. He immediately called Ginny at work. They received a second call, shortly afterwards, from Lawrence Memorial Hospital, letting them know that Andy did in fact have bacterial meningitis and was on his way to another hospital. Ginny and her husband got the first flight from their home in Minnesota to Kansas City, arriving about 6:00 p.m.

When Ginny and her husband reached the hospital, staff told them they had delayed putting Andy on a ventilator to assist his breathing so that he could tell them he loved them. They were told that, at best, Andy would lose fingers and toes, that he would likely be in kidney and perhaps heart failure by the following day, and that death was a real threat. Andy was in the medical intensive care unit for eight days and was then transferred to the burn unit ICU for several more weeks. The disease caused the equivalent of third degree burns over one-third of his body. He spent a total of nearly five months in the hospital, undergoing surgery to amputate all of his fingers except his right thumb and about one third of each foot.

Andy, a National Merit Scholar, graduated number one in his journalism class. Both his graduation ceremony and his 23rd birthday party were held in the burn unit family room.

Ginny joined the National Meningitis Association's "Moms on Meningitis" program to help educate other families in St. Cloud about the dangers of meningococcal disease and prevention methods, including immunization.

A vaccine to help prevent meningococcal disease is approved for use by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration among persons aged 2 to 55 years. The vaccine protects against four of the major strains of the disease.

Anyone can get meningococcal disease, but adolescents and young adults are increased risk for contracting the disease. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends meningococcal immunization for all adolescents 11 through 18 years of age, and college freshmen living in dormitories.

“As parents, we do everything we can to protect our children and ensure they remain healthy,” said Ginny. “My hope is that parents begin to recognize the symptoms of meningococcal disease and the importance of prevention.”

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