



Kim Zielinski embraces a teddy bear given to her during her battle with Hodgkin's disease. The stuffed animal was a gift from her friend, Debbie Housel, the religious education administrator and youth coordinator at St. Michael's Church in Newark. Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

Faith helps Newark youth cope with cancer

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer

NEWARK — When Kim Zielinski talks to anyone about her faith, she said it's inevitable that her bout with cancer works its way into the conversation.

"I don't want it to be 'Kim on cancer,' but it's hard to separate the two," said the 17-year-old senior at Newark High School.

In fact, Zielinski recalled that finding out she had Hodgkin's disease in August, 1989, changed her outlook on many aspects of her life — especially her faith.

Zielinski's life began to change that summer when a doctor found a swollen lymph node on the back of her neck during a routine athletic physical. After asking Zielinski to undergo further testing, the doctor told her she couldn't go out for the school soccer team until the source of the

lump was determined.

Zielinski said the most discouraging part of the situation was that she didn't even feel sick at the time.

"I didn't feel anything at all. At that time, I just wanted to get out and play soccer," Zielinski recalled.

Discovering that she had Hodgkin's disease began a year of chemotherapy, radiation and surgery for Zielinski. According to Thomas Zielinski, however, his daughter's acceptance of her disease became an inspiration to others — especially parishioners at St. Michael's Church in Newark.

"Kim was very visible in the church during her illness. People were grateful for that and were inspired in their faith," Thomas Zielinski said. "Even her doctors and teachers were comforted by the fact

that a young person going through this held on to her faith. It made them more comfortable with their's."

But Kim Zielinski — a eucharistic minister and soloist at St. Michael's — said that her ability to deal with her situation was not always as easy as it may have seemed. Although she said she never blamed God for causing her cancer, she admitted that she questioned the course of events that her life had taken.

"When you are by yourself in your room alone you question things. No one can see you cry then," Zielinski acknowledged.

One of the hardest things to deal with was the fact that her good friend, Gina, had died of cancer the year before.

"It was a strange thing to find out I had cancer, too," she recalled.

Zielinski said that dealing with Gina's death helped her to understand how her friends must have felt when she told them she had cancer, too.

"Now I have been on both sides of the fence," Zielinski noted.

In addition to Gina's mother, Mary, who Zielinski said offered her much strength and encouragement, her strong faith and her family have pulled her through the tough times.

"I think everybody when they go through something like this, when they need something, they turn to their religion," remarked the St. Michael's parishioner.

"Before my surgery, I was a normal teenager," remarked Zielinski, who added that her biggest worries used to be what clothes to wear or how she looked. "Now I get angry more when I see people worrying about such things."

After a year of treatments, Zielinski's cancer is now in remission. Although the disease needs to be in remission for five years before she is considered totally cured, Zielinski said she knows she has healed.

"As far as I'm concerned, I'm cured," Zielinski remarked confidently, noting that she will still graduate this June even though she missed about three quarters of her junior year at Newark.

Although Zielinski said her senior year has been difficult, she cited the help of her friend, Debbie Housel, for helping her get through the past year.

Housel, the religious education administrator and youth coordinator at St. Michael's Church, said that the struggle has made Zielinski value her life and others more.

"She now knows a faith that runs her life. She had to be so lonely in her cancer that she got to a point where all she had was her faith to pull her through," said Housel, Zielinski's confirmation sponsor last year.

Zielinski and Housel are attending the Tenth World Conference, entitled "Love, Life and the Family," in California through April 7. Housel asked Zielinski to accompany her when the girl expressed a sincere interest in the conference, which is sponsored by Human Life International.

Although the conference coincides with her senior class trip to Washington, D.C., Zielinski said she chose to attend the conference instead.

"I think it will be a better experience," Continued on page 18

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