

# Recovering teen plays song of faith

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

Rich Basler has taken his violin many places: school, church, a nursing home, even Carnegie Hall.

Yet it was when he was unable to perform — while undergoing treatment for leukemia a year ago — that he may have felt his deepest attachment to the instrument.

"I brought my violin up to the hospital. Sometimes, even if I didn't have enough energy to play, I'd just hold it and I'd feel a lot better," said Rich, 18.

For most of his high-school years, Rich had been a pretty busy guy. He began playing the violin in fifth grade, and in recent years has earned membership in the Finger Lakes Symphony Orchestra — where he's among only a handful of non-adults — and the highly regarded Hochstein Youth Symphony Orchestra based in Rochester. Rich has also shared his considerable talents with the contemporary choir at his parish, St. Michael's in Penn Yan, where he's a former altar server and eucharistic minister as well as a graduate of the parish school.

In the summer of 2001, Rich began suffering spells of fatigue and dizziness. Blood and bone-marrow tests revealed that he had a form of cancer known as acute myelogenous leukemia. Leukemia is a cancer of the white blood cells and bone marrow.

"I don't think I knew what to think. I was just in awe," Rich recalled.

His disease is life-threatening, but Rich feels fortunate that doctors caught it early on, and that his body was young and strong enough to withstand several weeks of intense chemotherapy that followed.

Rich said he was scared, but his family and faith — not to mention the violin — helped pull him through these dark times at Rochester's Strong Memorial Hospital. "I'd call the chaplain, and he or she would just sit with me and pray for me," he said. "I kind of knew I'd get through it. It was just another thing I had to overcome."

Rich's optimistic outlook impressed his mother, Marlene Bergstresser, who took a leave of absence from her nursing job to stay with him at the hospital.

"It was unbelievable. I know I wouldn't have the strength or the courage," she said. "He just went one step at a time and never complained. He had a lot of faith, even though it got really rough — shakes, 105-degree temperatures, seizure activity."

In September 2001, Rich's disease



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

The viola recently emerged as the instrument of choice for Rich Basler, who posed Oct. 16 in his church, St. Michael in Penn Yan, where he often has performed. The Penn Yan Academy senior, who underwent treatment for leukemia in 2001, received a Hands of Christ Award earlier this month in recognition of his service efforts.

was deemed to be in remission. He continued to receive treatments over the next few months, shuttling back and forth between Rochester and Penn Yan, where he lives with his mom, sister and stepfather.

"I lost my hair a few months after treatment started. It's the weirdest feeling, snow falling on a bare head," he remarked. However, he added, "Here in Penn Yan I think I was treated like a normal person, because they knew what I was going through."

Last fall a benefit dinner in Penn Yan raised \$4,000 for Rich and his family. He was tutored at home and didn't return full time to school at Penn Yan Academy until March 2002, although he did attend an academic awards ceremony and received a standing ovation. He also made limited appearances with the choir at St. Michael's Church.

"I tried to go to church whenever I could make an attempt, even if I only got to do the first hymn. I got sick to my stomach all the time — I was nauseous, had headaches," he said.

However, Rich felt well enough by April to travel to New York City and play with the Hochstein or-

## Youth

chestra at Carnegie Hall. "That was so awesome," he said.

Rich and his family observed the one-year anniversary of his leukemia's remission on Sept. 13. Although four more years of remission are required for him to be considered "cured," Rich said he's feeling much better and has resumed his full slate of activities.

"I'm doing really good; that's all I can ask for," he said. "Right now I'm just trying to catch up. I really like what I'm doing; it makes up for all the things I missed."

In addition to his community orchestra involvement, Rich is in the string ensemble and select choir at Penn Yan Academy. He noted that in the last year, the viola has emerged as his leading instrument of choice. He also participates on his high-school bowling team.

Additionally, Rich has performed several times recently for residents of Soldiers and Sailors Nursing Home in Penn Yan. "I wanted to give back a little to the community because they gave so much to me;

they prayed for me all the time," he explained. "Without them I couldn't have gotten through what I did."

Rich is increasing his practice schedule in anticipation of college auditions, but managed to take an evening off to receive his diocesan Hands of Christ Award Oct. 8 at St. John of Rochester Church in Fairport. Hands of Christ ceremonies recognize outstanding high-school seniors for their service efforts.

Although Rich said college auditions have the potential to be nerve-racking, he now feels better equipped to handle these pressure situations.

"I look at everything with a whole new perspective," he said. "Now there's nothing I can't handle. I just know that I'll be able to get through anything."

Rich said he's asked God, at times, why he was saddled with leukemia. "Then I realized it happened to me because God wanted it to happen. It makes me stronger in the end, probably — spiritually, mentally."

By the same token, Rich said, "I just ask that he keeps me well. I don't want to go through it again if I don't have to."