

She's fighting to save her sister's life

By Teri Barnes
staff writer

Like most teen-agers, Suzanne Kleabir Portman and Glynda Kleabir Chamie used to fight over wearing each other's clothes. After a while the fighting became more good-natured with the older sister affectionately tagging Glynda "messy Bessy."

Now, 30 years later, Portman is fighting for Glynda's life. "In March 1982 Glynda was in a terrible car accident, and she's been slowly debilitating ever since," said Portman of Comstock Street. "Last spring she went to the Mayo Clinic, and they told her she had two years. Then they found the disease is debilitating more rapidly. In September they cut it down to six months."

Chamie, 46, is quickly losing the use of her liver, requiring a lifesaving liver-transplant operation, her sister said. In the next couple of months, as soon as an organ becomes available, she is to charter a flight to Presbyterian University Hospital in Pittsburgh, Pa., and within two hours be ready for surgery. "The transplant will save her life. The disease will kill her," Portman said.

In the meantime, she is racing against the clock trying to raise the estimated \$150,000-\$250,000 the operation will cost. "Insurance companies don't cover transplants, they say that's experimental surgery. It's a cruel thing, but we're

just up in the air without funds," Portman said. PORTMAN is hoping the community will help her raise the money for her sister's medical expenses. So far, she has set up an account in the fund's name at a local bank, and made initial inquiries with local institutions, businesses and politicians. One early supporter, Fantastic Sam's hair salon in the Mid-Seven Shopping Center, will donate \$1 off each sale in December.

It has been a long time since the sisters were teen-agers growing up in Livonia. They moved here with their parents in the 1950s and settled in one of Livonia's first subdivisions, at Five Mile and Merriman. Portman married and she and her husband, Don, raised four children in a colonial-style home on Comstock Street. Her sister — the "business person" by Portman's definition — went to college, briefly married her husband, Omar, had two children, moved to a "farm" in Salem Township, and spent 23 years working her way up to office manager of an Automobile Club of Michigan branch in Ann Arbor. She also worked as an area supervisor for the United Fruit Co. At one time, her area included a part of Livonia.

Then 2 1/2 years ago their lives became as intertwined as family ties can bind. It happened while Chamie was driving home from work in Ann Arbor and was hit by a car that ran a stop sign. After that, her life became un-

derstandable. Lately, the reaction has caused a terrible itching in her skin, resulting in lesions across her body. She says her memory has been affected by the accident, and often her mind feels "cloudy."

"Sometimes I wake up at night with scratches all up and down my back," said Chamie in an Observer interview Thursday. DESPITE the pain and discomfort, she finds humor in things, whether in past recollections or in things people say to her today. "People say to me, 'How can you laugh when you know you have one year to live?' Well, I say, 'if I cry, it's going to be done in private.' Why should I pull everyone else down around me? Life's too short, too precious to make everyone else miserable. So I laugh."

This particular Thursday was a "good day." Her skin wore the familiar yellow cast but she was talkative, alert and charming. Her red hair is cut short with soft curls framing her face, highlighting an implish grin. Even the yellow cast didn't diminish the sparkle in her eyes when she smiled. Today, she made a joke about her sister returning from Stan's Market and quoting her "price of young liver." The laugh was easy, and Portman smiled with love in response to her sister's joke. Then Portman, sitting in a living room chair off to the side, said something about the possibility of getting Chamie a "chimpanzee's liver." (It's an obvious joke, playing off the recent news stories detailing the so-called infant "Baby Fae," who received a ba-

boon's heart in another transplant operation.) "What the hell, I'm game for anything," responded Chamie in lively humor. "Just as long as when they take my liver out, they keep it pumping, so if the new one doesn't work, they can put it right back in."

Looking to the next few months, she added solemnly, "I'm praying awful hard for a miracle."

The Portman home has another resident these days with the addition of the

women's mother, Elizabeth Kleabir, who suffers from cancer, and takes part in a home-hospice program. A former television room is outfitted with a hospital bed for her comfort. Their father, John Kleabir, suffered a stroke recently and also is hospitalized. "He'll come home with me," said Portman of his convalescence.

Those interested in contributing to the fund-raiser can contact Portman by writing them at 15436 Comstock, Livonia 48154.



ART EMANUELE/staff photographer
Suzanne Portman (right) has launched a fund-drive to raise the cost of her sister Glynda Chamie's medical expenses for a costly liver-transplant operation.

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Tenant group plans meeting

Tenants who live in the Bemco-Berk Co.-owned apartment complex are invited to a meeting at 8:30 tonight in William Tyndale College's auditorium, chapel in Farmington Hills. The college is on the northwest corner of Drake and 12 Mile. The meeting is sponsored by the Muirwood Tenants Association. Residents who live in the Bemco-owned Fairmont Park, Muirwood, Waldenwood, Kensington Manor and Waldenwood in Southfield are urged to attend by the association. Tenants, particularly those at Muirwood, have been fighting frequent rent increases and the lease system.

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