

# Road to recovery

## Daughter inspires dad to fight illness



Recovering at home: Farmington Hills resident Keith Retich says he has had "nothing but good news" about his illness.

When Keith Retich was diagnosed with aplastic anemia, he didn't want to read the information the doctors gave him about his disease.

The 41-year-old Farmington Hills resident didn't want to read about cure rates and fatality rates, about platelet counts and bone marrow transplants. Instead, he thought about his year-old daughter, Kelsey, and imagined what it would be like for her to grow up without a father.

"It was devastating to think of the possibility that I wouldn't be able to see her grow up — that I wouldn't be around even to see her enter school or start talking in complete sentences," said Retich. "Thinking about her helped keep me going. It made me fight."

The first sign that Retich was sick appeared in February when he began noticing large bruises on his legs. He visited his family practitioner for a checkup and some blood tests.

Three days later, his doctor called and told him to go immediately to emergency at Oakwood Hospital. The blood tests had shown that Retich's platelet levels were very low, and he needed a transfusion immediately.

Platelets are a component of blood that are important to the

body's clotting system. Low levels like Retich's cause bleeding that must be treated with platelet transfusions to prevent fatal hemorrhaging.

### Out of the blue

Three weeks later, he was transferred to the University of Michigan hospital, where a small sample of his bone marrow was examined in a procedure called a bone marrow aspiration. He was diagnosed with aplastic anemia on April 14.

"It came up out of the blue," said Retich. "I've been healthy all of my life. It was really scary. All of a sudden you try to get your life in order. I was doing all I could to secure my family, thinking the worst was going to happen."

Aplastic anemia is a rare but extremely serious disorder that is caused by the failure of the bone marrow to produce blood cells. When bone marrow cell production fails, normal blood levels of red cells, white cells, and platelets can fall to dangerously low levels. Symptoms of the disease are anemia, infection and bleeding.

By the time of his diagnosis, Retich was receiving platelet transfusions every other day. Each transfusion contained platelets from six voluntary blood

donors. Much of the time he was required to stay at the hospital, although some of the time he was treated on an outpatient basis.

"It was hard on my wife, raising a little one and trying to still go to work and having someone come in to take care of Kelsey," he said. "And then running back and forth to the hospital."

### Go for the gusto

One possible cure for aplastic anemia is a bone marrow transplant. Retich had to have a perfect match within his family, so a search was started to find a matched, unrelated donor.

Doctors at the University of Michigan and Harper Hospital began talking to him about another option — a new drug treatment requires the use of the drugs Anti Thymocyte Globulin and Cyclosporin. While either drug alone has a success rate of 30 percent, the duo-drug approach has success rate of 70 percent.

"I decided I had to go for the gusto and get the best treatment known," he said. "Harper Hospital was the only one doing it at that time. I can't say enough about the people at Harper and the treatment I received."

Retich's body began to build up

a resistance to the foreign platelets he was receiving through transfusions. His body began to produce antibodies that destroyed the transfused platelets because they did not match his HLA, or Human Leukocyte Antigen, type. From then on, he received platelets from donors that had an HLA type that matched his own.

"The platelets were there for me when I needed them," said Retich. "I can't say enough about the people and the time they took to donate their blood or platelets. It sustained my life while it gave the drugs a chance to work."

On May 6, Retich started the special drug treatment and began to receive platelet transfusions on a daily basis. He was released from the hospital May 12, but continued to receive transfusions every other day as an outpatient.

"The next step was just a waiting game," said Retich. "The doctors told me it would take two to three months before they could expect any type of turn around, if there would be any."

### Better and better

About a month and a half after the treatment began, Retich received a platelet transfusion

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