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Wednesday August 8, 2007

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This week, I'll be asked to save my brother's life

Today we take Taylor to the zoo.

Taylor is the 6-year-old daughter of Andre and Janet. Andre is my younger brother, recently turned 50, and Janet is his wife.

Andre is also the reason for this visit to my home state of Minnesota. I'm here on a mission: I'm here to try and save my brother's life.

Andre's battle with cancer started a little over a year ago with a tumor in one of his kidneys. During testing for surgery to remove the diseased kidney, the doctors discovered the metastasized cancer in his lungs.

This is the condition that's threatening his life.

The past 13 months have been a roller coaster of chemotherapy treatment plans that have brought hope initially but then proven unsuccessful. In the long run, none of the chemo treatments has stopped the cancer.

Now Andre's down to his last chance - an experimental procedure called an immune system transplant. It's similar to a bone marrow transplant but involves blood stem cells instead of marrow.

All five of Andre's natural siblings had to be tested to see which if any would be a suitable donor for the stem cells that could save his life. I'm the one who turned out to be the perfect match.

Some dramatic events are in store, but not today. Today is a day of focusing on the mundane. Today we take Taylor to the zoo.

We drive to Como Park in St. Paul. A lot has changed since Andre and I came here as kids. They don't put the animals in steel cages anymore. And most of the old rides are gone.

Andre and I reminisce about the space rockets with mounted ray guns and the little boats in actual water that were our favorite rides.

Still, it's great fun for a kid. Taylor finds a playmate, Leila, on a spinning teacups ride. Soon they are running around hand-in-hand like best friends.

Leila is with her father. We adults follow the two girls around the park as they run from ride to ride.

At one point, taking a break from rides, Taylor asks about the reason for my visit. Andre

Between the Lines

By Ray St. Louis
Herald Columnist



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tries to explain, in as gentle a way as possible, how Uncle Ray has something in his blood that daddy's body needs.

Uncle Ray is the only one who can give it to him, and without it he will probably die.

But Taylor is too young to fully comprehend. She gets a faraway look in her eyes. These are grown-up concepts she'd rather not think about.

She'd rather go on the Chinese dragon roller coaster with her new friend Leila. The roller coaster reminds me of the emotional ups and downs we've all had to suffer this past year.

We - my brothers and sisters - all want to help, to do something for our brother. We all love our brother. Andre is just a great guy (the term was invented for him).

But it has seemed as if there was nothing any of us could do beyond offering moral support. This whole past year, the news has always been bad. Our brother has been dying of a relentless, vicious disease and there hasn't been a thing any of us could do about it.

Then the transplant option came up. It's a long shot at best, but at least it's something. We all have to believe it's going to work.

And I am the chosen one - the one who will try to pass on to our brother the gift of life.

By the time this column comes out, the preparatory stages of this procedure will have started. They will boost my immune system while breaking down what is left of Andre's. Then the transplant.

Then... well. Then we cross our fingers and pray.

Back at Como Park, Andre tells Taylor it's time to leave. She says goodbye to her friend Leila and we turn to go. It's been a good day, one that young Taylor will hopefully file away - one more memory of a fun time with her dad to add to all the rest.

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