

By Jordy Clements

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Nestled in the bucolic hills of Northern New Jersey, amidst the watering holes that give the hamlet of Highland Lakes its name, there is a house built down a road not much wider than a car. In the backyard is Wawayanda State Park; the Appalachian Trail used to run through the front yard, where now a shiny black truck is parked. Craig Sweetman is the owner of that truck, a husband, a father of three, and one of maybe five people in the country dying of Desmoplastic Small Cell Tumor Sarcoma, an exceedingly rare form of cancer.

Craig and Tina Sweetman moved to the tight knit community of Barry Lakes twelve years ago because they thought it would be a good place to build a home. The prices were right, the fishing was plentiful, and they had heard the school system was good. Tina worked at an insurance company before giving birth to Taylor, the first of their three girls, now aged 9. Craig worked as a diesel mechanic to support the family, which grew again after the birth of Jennifer, age 5, and Leanne, age 4.

Five years ago, right around the time that Jennifer was born, Craig began to notice that something wasn't right: he would feel full after hardly eating, as though there was something taking up space in his abdomen. That something was cancer, and the prognosis gave Craig just three months to live. Since then, the Sweetmans say that they have been to "literally hundreds of doctors," but that many just "sent [them] home to let it grow."

The Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City was finally able to correctly diagnose Craig's unique disease, which unlike many other cancers, has no hereditary predisposition. Desmoplastic Small Cell Tumor Sarcoma can be caused only by environmental factors or what the Sweetmans term simply, "bad luck." Whether Craig's cancer was brought along by fate, or by the chemicals he came into contact with through his mechanic's work is of little consequence to the forward-thinking Sweetmans. As he says, "90 percent is your attitude."

"Craig always wakes up with a smile, willing to do anything to keep himself alive," his wife adds. Before, this meant chemotherapy, followed by long periods when the cancer would go into remission. Unfortunately for Craig, his cancer is as strong as his attitude, returning 90 percent of the time. His body is becoming immune to the chemotherapy, and this past January, the cancer returned, already in stage four. In cancer diagnosis, stage five is death.

As Tina scoured the Internet looking for any information she could find, Craig was forced to wait. As he says, sometimes it was "chemo on Monday, work on Tuesday." Finally, Tina learned of a man in London who had been treated with an experimental new surgery, an autologous stem cell transplant. He has been cancer free for the last seven years. The Sweetmans traveled to the National Cancer Institute in Maryland, where Tina recalls a doctor telling them, if you want your husband to live, "this is your only option."

The Sweetmans could not simply go in for surgery, however, they first had to convince a hospital to perform it. Unlike more routine procedures, little is known about how different patients will react to an autologous stem cell transplant, the kind of surgery Craig required. Many hospitals were loathe to admit Craig for the procedure, where failure could be fatal and the research benefits were relatively few due to the rarity of his cancer.

Monday, Sept. 18, the Sweetmans traveled to Philadelphia, finally meeting the only team of doctors willing to admit them. According to the Sweetmans, during his overnight stay Craig endured the equivalent of five straight days of high dose chemotherapy where doctors brought his body “as close to death as you can possibly get.” As a result, Craig’s bone marrow will probably fail in the near future, preventing his body from producing new blood cells. To combat this, doctors preserved Craig’s own healthy stem cells from before the high dose chemotherapy. His stem cells will be reinserted back into his bone marrow in a separate procedure administered in the coming weeks. Craig will then face a second round of high dose chemotherapy and a hospital stay that could take months. Tina is optimistic, “If it works, he could be cured.”

The surgery is dangerous, and it is not cheap. With the new procedure the Sweetman’s insurance will surely reach its yearly cap. “I’m not a nurse,” says Tina, but every night she must administer Craig’s daily injections to help cut costs. In response, their neighbors, whom the Sweetmans describe as “wonderfully supportive,” have rallied around their cause, whether it be watching the children when Craig goes in for surgery, or more proactive measures like helping to raise money for the family.

Craig’s body seemed to respond well to the aggressive chemotherapy, but it is not yet known what the long term effects will be. He credits faith with keeping him alive, but by this he does not only mean his active role in the local church, Our Lady of Fatima, or the close relationship he has with the church’s pastor, Father Bob. Craig also has a deep faith in his family, in medicine, and in himself. “The more time you can buy, the more [science] learns everyday,” Craig says. Tina agrees, “We keep digging [for new information], Craig would be dead otherwise.”

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Last Sunday, Sept. 24, neighbors organized a “Roadside Cleanup for the Sweetman Family” as the first of a series of events to help the Sweetmans. The event met at 10:30 a.m. at the Barry Lakes Club House, with adults and children helping to clean up the streets of the neighborhood. For their efforts, the volunteers were paid by the town, with the money raised being donated to Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Church and the family.

The Sweetmans have long been active in their local church, Our Lady of Fatima, and on Oct. 1 friends will host a “Pancake Breakfast at the Sweetman Church” after every mass until 1 p.m. A full breakfast menu is included at a price of \$6 for adults, \$5 for seniors, \$3 for children ages 5-12, and \$1 for children under 5. People wishing to donate food for

the breakfast, especially bacon or sausage, should contact Stephanie at [stephaniebuttery@kw.com](mailto:stephaniebuttery@kw.com), or Elaine at [etbrath@hotmail.com](mailto:etbrath@hotmail.com).

On Oct. 22 there will be a “Bake Sale” at the Franklin Wal-Mart, with hot dogs and baked goods being sold. People interested in baking for the event should contact Stephanie.

Finally, on Nov. 3 there will be a “Ziti Family Night” at the Barry Lakes Club House. More details on this will follow at a later date.