

He's spending his time trying to survive

by Helen Chase

Cook Inlet Tribal Council

James Denman, who is only 15, is dying.

His mother is trying desperately to save his life. Eva Atchak continues to search for a person whose blood will match her son's. Denman has leukemia and is now into his fourth year of fighting the cancer.

In October 1986 Denman was seen for a routine school physical so he could play hockey. The doctor noticed an unusually low white blood cell count and ordered more testing performed. The results showed Denman's bone marrow, the jellylike tissue in the cavities of bones which produces red and white blood cells, had been invaded by cancer.

"I didn't know what was going on," Denman said.

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—James Denman

"I was only 11 at the time. I thought it meant I would have to have a bone from one of my brothers. And everything would be OK," he said.

Four years later Denman doesn't sound like a 15-year-old. He now speaks medical jargon fluently and talks easily about blood antigens, platelets and bone marrow transplants.

Denman understands clearly the seriousness of his situation; if he doesn't find the right donor soon, he will die.

"I have a lot of hope. I haven't given up yet. I still try to do regular things like go to the movies with my friends from school, but there are restrictions," he said.

Because of the high risk of infection when exposed to crowds, Denman said he can't swim in a public pool, and the matinee is the only time he can go to a show.

Now that school is out for the summer, Denman spends most of his time at home, kept company by his mom and his 9-year-old brother, Michael.

Although he would like to make plans for the future, right now he

mostly concentrates on living long enough for the bone marrow transfusion that can cure him.

After the leukemia had been diagnosed, Denman was prescribed Hydroxyurea to control the white blood cell count. After three and a half years, the drug is no longer doing the job.

Denman's physician, Dr. Jerome Nasenbeny, a pediatrician at the Alaska Native Medical Center, had his case for the first three years.

Denman was sent to Seattle in December for treatment. Upon his

return to Anchorage, Denman was transferred to another doctor, as he had outgrown the pediatric ward at ANMC.

Becoming more depressed by her son's diagnosis and lack of response to treatment, Atchak tried to work and keep her family together.

Co-workers encouraged Atchak to talk about the situation and never give up. Atchak learned that 70 percent of all bone marrow transfusions come from outside the family, and this statistic inspired her to seek an unrelated donor.

In December, Atchak donated her own bone marrow to keep her son alive. The match was not exact, but it has prolonged Denman's life. She hopes it's long enough for the right donor to be found.

Another bone marrow transfusion from his mother would be fatal for Denman due to the buildup of antibodies produced from the first procedure.

Atchak is Eskimo and by nature is quiet and reserved. Only out of desperation has she been able to come forward and ask for help.



James Denman, at right, who is battling leukemia, poses with his mother Eva Atchak and brother Michael.

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