

CALGARY HERALD

Back from the brink

After more than 300 blood transfusions and a bone-marrow transplant, Calgary's Tori Kennedy makes an emotional return to diving

George Johnson, Calgary Herald

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Oddly, the first and only time Tori Kennedy felt the slightest pang of self-righteous indignation occurred while standing on the 10-metre platform in Montreal last Saturday, at the very moment of her triumphant return.

"Up until that time, all through the waiting and the worrying, I'd just thought of what happened to me as something I had to go through. I never thought, 'Why me? I never felt any bitterness or any self-pity.

"Diving was really on the back burner. I just wanted to feel good again. I wanted to be healthy again. That's all I thought about.



Last Saturday, Tori Kennedy, 20, plunged back into international diving after waging a three-year battle to recover from a serious illness.

Ted Jacob, Calgary Herald

"But being there last weekend, it came flooding back to me how much this meant to me. How passionate I was about it, how much I'd missed. And how this was an Olympic year coming up.

"It's funny, but you've been away so long, you almost forget why you loved it in the first place. Then it hits you and the competitive side kicks in."

Following three years removed from the sport, enduring more than 300 blood transfusions and a bone marrow transplant at Foothills Hospital, the 20-year-old Calgarian made an emotional return to diving at the CAMO Invitational meet.

She finished 20th on the weekend out east, at a meet that included all the hotshots from the U.S., Australia, Canada and Great Britain. A tough field, to be sure.

But the doing, rather than the placing, is what mattered.

Tori Kennedy's story is courage, tenacity and belief.

In October of 2004, she was in Brazil with the rest of the Canadian team for the world junior diving championships when her athletic career, and her life, were turned upside down.

"I just didn't feel well," she recalls. "For a few months, I'd been tired. I felt run down. I had trouble even walking up stairs. I started having nosebleeds all the time."

The mother of a fellow diver luckily happened to be a doctor. Kennedy was taken to hospital for a blood test, and alarm bells began ringing. Her platelet count was eight. The normal range is from 300 to 600. Her red cell count was about 50. The normal range there, from 120 to 130.

"I'd never had to go through a blood transfusion before, but I needed two in order to be strong enough to make the trip home."

And so began a litany of visits to Foothills. Initially, following a bone-marrow biopsy, leukemia was mentioned. But then a diagnosis of aplastic anemia was confirmed. Only one or two cases per million people are reported each year.

"After six months, when I hadn't started feeling better," she admits, "fear begins to set in. You wonder, 'Am I going to feel this way all my life?' "

Aplastic anemia is the unexplained failure of bone marrow to produce blood cells. Blood transfusions, often taking hours, become a normal routine. Treatment involves heavy doses of immunosuppressive therapy. And, as in Kennedy's case, bone marrow transplants are often the only hope for a cure.

"My brother wasn't a match," she says. "And that rules out your parents, because they're less likely to be a match."

She was then placed on the International Bone Marrow Transplant Registry. After waiting months, searching for reason to hope, an anonymous donor stepped forward. The transplant was a success.