

# FOCUS *on the* Good Life!

By Brenda Drumm

*IPA family member, Brenda Drumm, describes her personal triumph over adversity. She offers this feature to our readers to encourage those who are challenged by ill-health and to remind all of us that Faith is a blessing.*



Brenda - before illness

**B**renda Drumm, Communications Officer for the Irish Bishops' Conference at Maynooth, recently returned to work after battling cancer for more than a year. She told Michael Kelly, Editor of The Irish Catholic about her struggle and how Faith helped her through.

December 8, 2006, Solemnity of the Immaculate

Conception, proved to be a life-changing day for the Drumm and Tobin families. "I woke up on December 8 feeling sick. At that time I was diagnosed with a stomach bug. I went back to work and busied myself with preparations for Christmas in the office and at home," Brenda recalls.

*On Christmas Day, with two young children overjoyed with Santa's kindness, Brenda fell ill again, and the symptoms became more severe during the Christmas holidays. By the New Year, things were so serious that Brenda was referred as an emergency to Tallaght Hospital in Dublin.*

"My kidneys had started to fail. I had several days of tests and on January 10, 2007 I was diagnosed with multiple myeloma also known as Kahler's disease; it is a form of bone marrow cancer and while treatment can be very effective, there is, at this stage, no cure".

*Brenda, like any mother and wife, thought first of her two children Emma and Cathal and her husband Bryan.*

"My initial feelings were shock, fear, hopelessness - a diagnosis of cancer had never entered my head. I immediately thought of my kids, my husband and my immediate family and what the news was going to do to them."

"I think it's fair to say that my whole life flashed before me, especially when the doctor told me that there is no cure for what I have. I remember asking the consultant three questions":

- 1) Am I going to die?
- 2) Is the disease hereditary? and
- 3) Would I lose my hair?



Home at last!

"When I look back from where I am now, the 'losing my hair' question is so trivial, but at the time I suppose I was thinking of the kids and how I would look to them!"

### Letting myself be sick

"Being diagnosed with an incurable form of cancer places a heavy burden upon a person and a family. Initially it was very difficult for me to let go of my life as it was before I was diagnosed.

"I had a very busy, very active life and to be suddenly told: 'you are seriously ill and your life as you have lived it is over for the time being', well, that was very difficult for me."

"I had to give up work and all the various other things that I was involved in. It was a huge challenge for me to 'allow' myself to be sick and it took a lot of getting used to, because I just wasn't used to sitting still or having other people do things for me."

"One of the lowest points for me was when I was going through my stem-cell transplant in July/August. The treatment was very severe and the side effects were very unpleasant. Days blurred into one another with little sign of any improvement or relief from the symptoms, and it was hard to see any light at the end of the tunnel".

"During this time, I wasn't able to see my little boy at all because of the risk of infection to me. That was very hard, because he is only three, and he really missed me and I him. He used to come on the phone and say 'Mammy do you want to come home to me?' I wanted that more than anything in the world, but of course, I couldn't, and how do you explain that to a three year old?"

"It was hard for my daughter too, because I was admitted to hospital just as her summer break from school started and when everyone else was heading off on holidays, she was faced with something very different."

Brenda is in little doubt about what helped her hope for light at the end of the tunnel.

"My husband and kids, my extended family, friends, and work colleagues were a great support and help to me. There wasn't a day went by that I didn't get a text message, a card, call or letter from someone."

"There were so many people praying for me and willing me on, it was as though I was being carried some of the way. I took great encouragement and strength from that."

"Of course, I owe so much to the medical team who helped me through the worst of the treatment," Brenda says.

### Faith

*Faith was also vital in Brenda's journey back to health.*

My faith was a great help too in getting through some very tough days. My sense of humour helped a lot; there were days when if I didn't laugh I would have had to cry so I laughed!

"My faith helped me a great deal throughout my illness and continues to do so."

"In July, when I was going through the harshest of my treatment, there were some days where I did feel very close to God and to Mary in particular. "



My children - Emma and Cathal Tobin



Brenda - March 2008

"I remember one particular day when the side effects had reached their peak and I was suffering a lot, I offered a prayer and asked for help. I didn't want a way out of what I was going through but a helping hand. I know that my prayer was answered that day and I was able to draw on great reserves of strength during that time."

"A day or so after my diagnosis last year, a friend of mine gave me a piece of scripture from the Bible in a frame to look at from time to time. It used to remind me that I had only been sent what God knew I could handle. The piece of scripture is: 'You can trust God not to let you be tried beyond your strength, and with any trial, He will give you a way out of it and the strength to bear it.'"

Brenda says: "the trial I was sent, and the journey I have been on over the past year, has if anything made my faith stronger."

### **World Day of the Sick**

In his message for the World Day of the Sick this year, celebrated on February 11, Pope Benedict XVI says that this day is a "propitious occasion to reflect on the meaning of pain and the Christian duty to take responsibility for it in whatever situation it arises." He goes on to say that "pain, received with faith, becomes the door by which to enter the mystery of the redemptive suffering of Jesus."

Brenda believes that "the celebration of the World Day of the Sick each year is an important event to acknowledge, because it makes us aware of the many people around us who are suffering from ill-health. It's also a time to acknowledge all of those people who help the sick doctors, nurses, priests, religious, carers etc. When we come together to celebrate this event, we are reminded that we are never alone in our time of need."

*"You can trust God  
not to let you be tried  
beyond your strength,  
and with any trial, He  
will give you a way out  
of it and the strength  
to bear it"*

### **'Why me?' not relevant**

Many people faced with serious illness ask themselves 'why me?'

"I can't ever remember asking 'Why me?' or thinking 'Why did I get cancer?' Why does anyone get cancer? It was important for me to move on from the diagnosis and get straight into the treatment of the illness and I felt that if I was focusing on 'why me?' or 'poor me', that it would stop me from giving all my energies to fighting the disease," she says.

### **Change of outlook**

Brenda's outlook on life has changed as a result of her illness.

"Physically, emotionally, I am a different person. My attitude to life and the world around me has changed. I don't sweat the small stuff in life anymore! I cherish each day and look forward to the days, weeks, months, and years ahead. There are a lot of simple things that I don't take for granted any more.

"My ambitions in life have changed too. My ambitions in life now are to grow old with my husband and to be around for my children as they grow up: to see my little

boy starting school, to be there as my daughter makes her confirmation and starts secondary school and to be around to tell them to tidy their rooms and do their homework.

"I am definitely a stronger person than I was before my illness. I feel I could take on the world and win. But for now, I am very happy to be a wife, a mum, a sister, a daughter, a friend and a colleague. I am also delighted to be back at work in the Catholic Communications Office.

### The future

"It's hard to know what the future holds in terms of my health, but I am filled with courage and hope as I go about my day-to-day life. I am reminded of a proverb that was sent to me after I was diagnosed last January; it says: "Health is a crown, worn by those who are sick and

seen only by those who are well.

"I was very struck by these words because health is so taken for granted when you have it. I am delighted to have my crown of health back; well, maybe not a crown, more of a tiara!"

*Note: permission to publish this feature has been granted by Michael Kelly, Editor of The Irish Catholic newspaper.*

# Best Comeback!

If you ever testify in court, you might wish you could have been as sharp as this policeman. He was being cross-examined by a defense attorney during a felony trial. The lawyer was trying to undermine the policeman's credibility...

Q: 'Officer did you see my client fleeing the scene?'

A: 'No sir. But I subsequently observed a person matching the description of the offender, running several blocks away.'

Q: 'Officer -- who provided this description?'

A: 'The officer who responded to the scene.'

Q: 'A fellow officer provided the description of this so-called offender. Do you trust your fellow officers?'

A: 'Yes, sir. With my life.'

Q: 'With your life? Let me ask you this then officer. Do you have a room where you change your clothes in preparation for your daily duties?'

A: 'Yes sir, we do!'

Q: 'And do you have a locker in the room?'

A: 'Yes sir, I do.'

Q: 'And do you have a lock on your locker?'

A: 'Yes sir'



Q: 'Now why is it, officer, if you trust your fellow officers with your life, you find it necessary to lock your locker in a room you share with these same officers?'

A: 'You see, sir - we share the building with the court complex, and sometimes lawyers have been known to walk through that room.'

The courtroom erupted in laughter, and a prompt recess was called. The officer on the stand has been nominated for this year's 'Best Comeback' line -- and we think he'll win.