

NINA MOINI: Time for another installment of our series, *Thank You, Stranger*, where we hear stories of kindness that made a difference in the lives of Minnesotans. The snow from our big storm is already melting, but this story came to us as the blizzard was on its way. The weather forecast had Jim Gausman thinking of another storm that hit 20 years earlier. *Minnesota Now* producer Alanna Elder talked with him.

ALANNA ELDER: Jim Gausman was unfazed by the recent blizzard.

JIM GAUSMAN: I'm a person who goes out and shovels my neighbors.

ALANNA ELDER: The more snow, the better. He wasn't always like this. He's a cyclist. And about 25 years ago, a neighbor gave him some advice that led him into the world of winter biking.

JIM GAUSMAN: Up until that point, I would get cold feet and cold fingers when I was out, and didn't like the cold that much. But he asked me one day, what size shoe do you wear? And I said, oh, 10 and 1/2. And he says, go out and buy at least size 13s. The only thing that keeps your toes warm is blood flow. If you restrict the blood flow to your toes, you'll have cold feet. And I bought the big shoes, and I have not had cold feet since.

ALANNA ELDER: About five years after that, something else happened that would change how Jim thought about the blood in his veins.

JIM GAUSMAN: I caught something that to me looked like the flu. After a week or so, the fever and the cough went away. But I had this lingering sore throat. And finally, my wife Susan said, shut up, Jim, I don't want to hear you complaining about your throat. Go to the doctor, get the pink stuff. Get it done with. I said, OK. Yes, dear.

ALANNA ELDER: Two rounds of antibiotics later, he still had that sore throat. So he got a blood test for mono. Almost as soon as he got home, his phone rang.

JIM GAUSMAN: It was a doctor. And he said, well, you don't have mono. He says, but you don't have enough white blood cells for us to even count. The next day, the doctor called me at work and said, we have to get to the bottom of this. He said, I have you scheduled for a bone marrow biopsy on Monday.

Well, it was the next day. It was Tuesday of Thanksgiving week. The doctor called me and said, whatever you're doing, drop it. Go to the hospital now. You have leukemia. I looked at the phone, and it was like that was an, oh, no. That's quite a word.

And I went over, and I woke my wife up and said, take me to the emergency room. Doctor says I have leukemia. She says if I ever wake her up like that again, she'll kill me on the spot. That's not the way to wake her up. I had about a 25% chance of living, and that the average patient lives eight weeks with acute myelogenous leukemia.

ALANNA ELDER: By Thanksgiving Day, Jim was getting his first round of chemotherapy. He spent the next few months in and out of the hospital. His doctors thought the best move was what's called an autologous stem cell transplant. Basically, they'd suppress his cancer enough to take healthy stem cells from his bone marrow and freeze them. Then they'd turn up his chemo dosage to kill off all the cancer. It would kill healthy cells, too.

JIM GAUSMAN: The nurse came out to me in the clinic and said, hi, Jim. How are you doing? And then she says, you're OK taking pills? And I said, yeah, I can take several at a time if I have to. And she stood up, and she said, good. And she left.

Well, the next day she comes in, and she's got a glossy sided gift bag. But it was a big bag. It was like a cub food sized gift bag. And I thought, oh, do I get a gift? And she opened this bag up, and it was full of prescription bottles. And the instructions on the vial said, take 40 pills four times a day. And that was a four-day prescription. So I had to take 160 pills a day for four days as part of my lethal dose.

ALANNA ELDER: After that routine, he'd have two more days with high-dose chemo pumped into his veins. Then it would be time for the life-saving transplant. The doctors would take the stem cells they'd collected from his body earlier and give them back. It would be a fresh start if it worked.

JIM GAUSMAN: I would go to the clinic every day, and there was a bunch of people in line for transplants, and some of them had me, and I got to know all the other patients pretty well. You would see when they got their high-dose chemo, they just sag really bad.

And then after the transplant, it's a week and a half or two weeks before the stem cells engraft in the bone marrow. And all of a sudden, people are up and about and looking good. The doctors didn't pull any punches. I knew that there was a good chance of dying. And some of the people in line ahead of me did die. You don't know how much courage you have until you have to have the courage.

ALANNA ELDER: His stem cell transplant was at 10:00 AM on March 13, 2006.

JIM GAUSMAN: I felt like I'd been in a barroom brawl and had lost badly, and that someone had kicked me in the face.

ALANNA ELDER: Plus, it snowed.

JIM GAUSMAN: I think I was aware that we were going to get a little bit of snow. I had no idea.

ALANNA ELDER: The Twin Cities got about 10 inches that day, according to recordings at the Minneapolis-Saint Paul airport.

JIM GAUSMAN: I look out, and the first thing I do is-- I'm a shoveler. And I grab my shovel because I knew that we weren't going to get out of the driveway if it wasn't shoveled, and I wasn't making new red blood cells. I was making no new cells.

ALANNA ELDER: The treatment had left Jim vulnerable to bleeding and infection. He had basically no immune system. He needed that transplant.

JIM GAUSMAN: And that's when Susan realizing that we're not going to get out on the street. We're mired in. And she called the city and was informed by the city, no, your streets already been plowed. She said, oh, no, it isn't. She says, I'm looking at it right now. It's not plowed. So they sent the truck over. We were joyful to see that truck come because we needed to get downtown. I was awfully worried that the truck coming from the University of Minnesota carrying my stem cells wouldn't make it to my clinic.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

ALANNA ELDER: Jim made it to his appointment. So did his stem cells and one of the nurses on his medical team. It wasn't easy, but the transplant worked. His cancer has not returned. He still lives in Mahtomedi, but he doesn't the name of the driver who helped him that day.

JIM GAUSMAN: A couple of times since in the last years, when I've been out shoveling my driveway in the city, plow comes by, I'll stop him, and go over and tell the plow operator, sometimes what you're doing is life and death. I have thanked random plow operators over the years. I am in touch with the two nurses that were my team. I put on a little Thanksgiving coffee out at a city park in Mahtomedi every year.

And this year for the 20th anniversary of my diagnosis, they both came to my little gathering. Honestly, I'm grateful to a lot of people who helped me, but I'm really happy that I got the leukemia. I mean, I'm grateful I got the leukemia because it really changed me, and it changed me in a better way. I'm not greedy about things. I share things really well now because I'm just kind of here for the short term. Whenever it comes, it'll come, and it's OK.

NINA MOINI: You can find a photo of Jim and his wife Susan in warmer weather on our website, mprnews.org. They went to Cabo San Lucas last month to celebrate his 20 years post-cancer treatment. If you have a story of a stranger who made a difference in your life, reach out to us by emailing *Minnesota Now* at mpr.org.