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Navy Lieutenant Has Personal Tie to Hospital Project

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BASRAH, Iraq -- Acute lymphoblastic leukemia.

The very mention of the disease brings shudders of horror from parents of children two to five years old, who account for most of the disease's victims.

ALL, as it is called, accounts for 80 percent of all childhood cancer and also attacks adults over 50.

Thirty years ago, the disease killed all but five percent of those who contracted it.

For Navy Lt. Allen Willey, serving with U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) in Iraq, and his wife Shereen, the horror became a reality when their three-and-a-half year old son, Christian, who had been exhibiting excessive bruising, and petechiae, tiny red spots from shattered blood vessels, on his chest, received the devastating diagnosis.

"You don't live your life thinking about these diseases," said Willey, the resident engineer for the Basrah Children's Hospital project.

"The impact never hits you until it happens to you. And then, at first, you don't believe it."

The nightmare began in December 2000, several days after Christmas.

Willey said Shereen had taken Christian to the doctor because they noticed the spots on his chest. Because it didn't appear to be chicken pox or measles, and Christian didn't appear to be sick, they decided to wait until after the holiday to treat what they thought would be a benign condition.

"They took a blood sample from him," Willey said. "And the next thing I knew, I was riding in an ambulance to UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) Medical Center and my son had a platelet count of eight. A normal platelet count ranges from 150,000 to 400,000. He could have fallen off of his bicycle, bumped his head and started bleeding internally. He could have passed away in his sleep."



Navy Lt. Allen Willey has a picture of his family on the computer in his office at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, where he is the resident engineer for the Basrah Children's Hospital project. [USACE PHOTO by Betsy Weiner]

The bone marrow manufactures platelets, which circulate in the blood, forming clots to stop excessive bleeding. Christian had none.

The next few years tested the Willeys, and their then six-year-old daughter Ashley, as nothing else will.

Through Christian's chemotherapies, 24 spinal taps, countless CAT scans and hospitalizations, the Willeys' priorities changed dramatically.

"I used to make donations to the National Rifle Association because I firmly believe in the right of a person to own and bear a said. "But your personal goals really change when you are struck with this kind of tragedy. Now I donate money to the leukemia and support groups that helped us through this."

Willey now finds himself in a position he likes to call fate.

As resident engineer in charge of the Basrah Children's Hospital, a pediatric oncology facility being built in that city, Willey carries his battle against the disease that nearly killed his son.

Christian, now nine, has been in remission for four years.

Today, the survival rate for the disease is 86 percent and rising.

"Basrah was chosen for a very specific reason for this hospital," he said. "Here in Iraq, the incidence of childhood cancer, most is eight times higher than in the west, and in Basrah, that number is four times higher than in the rest of Iraq. One hundred fifty of 1,000 die before they reach five, mostly of ALL, and no one knows why. Diagnosed leukemia cases in Basrah have increased since 1989," he explained.

"So this hospital project has become really personal for me. It was a fluke that I got this project. When I left Washington State was stationed with the Navy, I didn't know what I would be doing, but I knew it would be in Basrah. And now, on this project, we do everything I know – 20 years of construction experience. Now I can give something back."

He explained that the facility will accept referrals from clinics throughout Iraq for children who are diagnosed with diseases like are beyond a clinic's ability to treat.

"It (the hospital) will have specialists who can treat the childhood cancers and other conditions, such as neurological problems: "The hospital will have childhood cancer specialty clinics, capable of radiological treatments, chemotherapies, fluoroscopy, CAT MRIs. There will be an intensive care unit that will treat and monitor children whose immune systems are exhausted by the treatments are prone to infection because their bodies have lost the ability to stave off other diseases."

He added that support functions will be an important part of the hospital's services – support for parents and families who have been shattered by diagnoses.

"Support becomes a way of life for the parents and the family," he said. "In the states, there are groups of people who have had a grandchild struck by this disease. One group ran a Toy Closet – a place where children could go to pick out a toy – usually two they would go have a procedure, such as a spinal tap. That procedure is particularly awful – they have to draw the fluid to run the test but they prefer the child to be awake because of the risk of sticking the needle in the wrong spot.

"I can remember how awful it was – your child freaking out from the pain and your wife putting a headlock on the child so he could go away. But the children were rewarded with the toys for going through this – it was like a reward for them. And it was thanks to these groups."

He noted that these groups, along with the "Make A Wish" Foundation, an organization that grants critically ill children their wish, are an important part of the treatment process and believes the hospital will generate the kind of spirit among the people

"You have no idea what you are in for. So when it first happens, you battle yourself," he said.

"You think 'This is not happening. What is going on...what do we do?' You may have other young children who are worried and concerned because their parents are gone and they have to stay in various places, being cared for by other people. So when you have counselors and people who know the information, it's a relief. The doctors will talk to you about your child, but it is the support from chaplains and religious counseling to assistance from outside groups that ultimately comforts you."

Willey added that having a critically ill child dwarfs all other problems a family might have.

He noted that Iraq is going through civil unrest and having a hard time organizing itself.

"A lot of the good doctors have left," he said. "And they don't want to come back because it's a crazy environment. Meanwhile these families suffering through tragedy. Their children are passing away and they have no idea why. To create this hospital – it's another one of those confidence builders. You have people around the world coming together, bringing in funds and putting this together, making it work. And I am so proud to be a part of it."

The hospital has been under construction for five years and has endured setbacks of funding and contractors.

USACE continued the project after contractor Bechtel left the site and the Gulf Region South assumed oversight of the project. Construction is about 37 percent complete.

With three Jordanian contractors taking care of everything from equipment to design and construction, the site boasts from site managers and a workforce that fluctuates between 400 and 550.

The project should be up and running by February 2009, He added.

Willey emphasized that what motivates him to make the project succeed is the empathy he feels for the parents who are ending the life of their child, his wife and son did.

"I want to share my knowledge," he said. "Close the gaps. I know what this can mean to a family going through a tragedy. I'm going the extra mile and will make extra effort to close the gaps. We have a great construction team and they will continue to move forward until the job here is finished."

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