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## 'Wee man' gets big news

by Amanda Munger

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LUMBERTON — Christmas came early this year for 10-year-old Christopher Branch — and the present is a life-saver.

Christopher, who lives with Jessica and Don Ward in Lumberton, recently got word that his second bone marrow transplant was successful, putting a happy ending on a difficult year.

“This the greatest Christmas present Christopher could ever get,” said Amy Mercer, a close friend of Christopher’s family who helped raise money to defray the costs of his medical expenses.

The Lumberton boy underwent his first transplant in May, but the marrow didn’t take, prompting the need for the most recent procedure on Nov. 10.

“They run blood tests to see what percent are the donor cells and what percent are the host cells,” Jessica said. “They ran Christopher’s a little early and he seemed to be doing so well. We were afraid it was like last time.”

The results showed that 83 percent were donor cells — or healthy cells.

Christopher needed the transplant to boost his immune system, which didn’t produce sufficient T-cells to fight infections. Along with his low T-cell count, he has a rare form of dwarfism and a progressive lung disease that causes recurrent bouts with pneumonia.

Fundraising efforts have been under way for months for Christopher, affectionately called “Wee Man” by friends and family, and nearly \$9,000 has been collected through fish fries, car washes, a golf tournament, a gospel sing and other events.



Christopher's illness has been closely followed by the Lumberton community. Jars were set up in local businesses to collect donations and Mercer started Coins for Christopher to solicit help at J.C. Hargrave Elementary School.

The money helped the family maintain a second household in Durham.

"It helped a lot this summer when the transplant did not take like it was supposed to and they needed to stay up there," Mercer said.

Donations can still be sent to help. Checks should be made payable to the Christopher Branch Bone Marrow Fund and sent to P.O. Box 3357, Lumberton, N.C., 28359.

Jessica and Christopher are living in an apartment in Durham and hope to be coming home in late February or early March. Don is in Lumberton most of the time, working his job as a police officer.

"They let us leave the hospital and move into our apartment at 25 days after transplant, which is just super fast," Jessica said.

The two make daily visits to the clinic for tests and monitoring. It is a numbers game right now, keeping tabs on platelets, donor cells, host cells, white blood cells, red blood cells, and more.

"You have to keep an eye on everything," Jessica said. "... You almost learn how to be a doctor because you have to know what this means and what that means."

Doctors say Christopher's improvements are coming quick.

"His levels are so good right now that next week they are thinking about letting him go to the clinic twice a week instead of every day ... and eventually taking out the central line," Don said. "He's doing better than everybody anticipated. That's everybody's prayers working."

Jessica posted a video on her Facebook page of Christopher celebrating after being told he would be able to go home.

"The doctor told him that he engrafted — he did that dance then," Don said. "He called it the happy dance. It was to Michael Jackson, 'Beat It.'"

That wasn't the only celebration after Christopher got the news.

"When the kids engraft and the doctor tells them they can go home, they have a confetti parade," Don said. "All the doctors and the nurses and secretaries and the kids who feel like it, they all stand by their doors with bags of confetti and throw it as they walk through."

Christopher has spent many holidays and birthdays in the hospital.

"On the floor for the (pediatrics) they have a lot of stuff that they try to do for them like trick-or-treating in the hall and Santa Claus came to the unit," Jessica said. "They really try to keep their spirits up. I think they do a very good job of

that.”

Although no longer in a hospital bed, Christopher is still on isolation to protect his fragile immune system. He can't be around crowds and wears a mask wherever he goes.

The apartment, provided at a discount by the Evanosky Foundation, has become a getaway.

“It's cool. It feels like I'm at the beach,” Christopher said by telephone. “ ... This kind of feels like the beach because it has a little balcony outside.”

Don and the couple's other children, Chelsi Ward and Don Smith, will be traveling to Durham today to celebrate Christmas as a family, but Christopher got a few presents early from the family of one of Don's fellow police officers.

Shawn Bryd, his wife Serena and their two kids collected money to get him an Ipod Itouch, a \$50 gift card so he can buy some music for it, and a Nintendo DS with three games.

Don said his co-workers care about Christopher.

“They're real supportive — they ask about him all the time,” Don said.

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