

The Rosa and Ettore Love Story



The story of Rosa and Ettore Lacchei reads like a classic love story. Rosa was living at home on Loomis Street in Chicago with her parents; Ettore came to the U.S. from Battipaglia, Italy to visit his aunt, who also lived on Loomis Street. They met in July and married in November. Today, 41 years later, they finish each other's sentences and share a sandwich at lunch. They speak with medical fluency about Rosa's recent battle with cancer, determined that it won't take them down.

Rosa was working as a teacher for Lake County SEDOL in Illinois, assisting low-functioning handicapped children. In February 2009, she became very sick with what she thought was the flu. In May, she began experiencing headaches. In June they got worse, and by July, her left ear was beating like a drum throughout the night.

"I was tired all the time," she says. "Then my other ear started throbbing. I just couldn't stand it anymore."

Ettore convinced her to call a doctor, who eventually suggested doing some blood tests. "The doctor said it would take one week to get the test results," Ettore explains. "He called that afternoon and said that Rosa was anemic and that she should go to the hospital."

After much cajoling, Rosa went to a hospital emergency room where she was given another blood test. "The doctor said that I'd caught a bug," she explains. "But he said I should see an oncologist. So on Monday morning, I went to see the oncologist, who did more blood tests. I had the same blood test done three times in one week."

The oncologist decided to do a bone biopsy because Rosa's platelets were so low. The experience was extremely painful for Rosa, but she managed. While the doctor predicted test results within a week, he called their home that afternoon with bad news. "You have leukemia," he said. I couldn't believe it," remembers Rosa.

Ettore was a sergeant in the Italian Army when he was young. He learned the importance of taking charge and caring for others. He used those empowering skills to help his wife find the best care available. Rosa and Ettore discussed the various hospitals in the area where she could receive treatment. Upon a recommendation from a friend, they decided to call Cancer Treatment Centers of America (CTCA) at Midwestern Regional Medical Center which happened to be less than 30 minutes from the Lacchei's home.

They learned that CTCA doctors specialize in treating many types of cancer, including complex and advanced stage cases. They work as a team, alongside cancer experts across multiple disciplines to help patients fight cancer while also helping to maintain their overall well being.

CTCA physicians and staff use state-of-the-art diagnostic tools, including advanced imaging and laboratory tests, to accurately locate and stage the disease. Then working together with patients and their caregivers, they find an integrated approach that's right for each patient. Each individualized cancer treatment plan includes innovative treatments (e.g., surgery, radiation, chemotherapy), combined with supportive cancer therapies (e.g., nutrition therapy, naturopathic medicine, oncology rehabilitation, mind-body medicine, spiritual support) so patients maintain strength during treatment and feel strong in body, mind and spirit.

The care and treatment Rosa received at CTCA was swift and sure from the beginning. The on-call doctor was waiting for them in the ER where she was given yet another blood test; she was then immediately moved to the 4th floor, Stem Cell Transplant & Cell Therapy Program to receive a blood transfusion. While the previous doctor had told her she had leukemia, he had not told her what type of leukemia.

Rosa's new doctor, Hematologist/ Oncologist Dr. Syed Abutalib, immediately called the hospital where Rosa had been previously treated to ask for the bone biopsy, but the hospital reported the sample had been lost.

"Can you imagine that they lost the bone biopsy?" asks Rosa. "It was so painful the first time, and I had to have another bone biopsy. The doctor promised it wouldn't be as painful this time under his care, and he was right."

To Rosa's and Ettore's amazement, the biopsy was without any pain. The next evening, Dr. Abutalib came to see Rosa with a more complete diagnosis: Acute Promyelocytic Leukemia (APL) Stage 2. "He told me the good news was that it was curable. Ten years ago, it wasn't," she says.

APL is a rare form of cancer usually found in young children. It is a type of cancer in which there are too many immature blood cells in the blood and bone marrow. In 1995, a medication named Vesanoid was approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to treat APL.

Rosa was treated by Dr. Istvan Redei, MD, Hematologist-Oncologist and Director of the Stem Cell Transplant and Cell Therapy Program at CTCA. Dr. Redei suggested a treatment of chemotherapy and Vesanoid at the same time. Rosa spent five days receiving chemotherapy, and then took Vesanoid for 40 days. She continued this treatment for five months and in January, received the hopeful news that her blood levels had stabilized and that she was in remission. She'll continue to take Vesanoid until the spring of 2011, and continues to have blood tests at CTCA every month.

Surprisingly, Rosa looks forward to these hospital visits. "Even now, when I go to the hospital, the nurses hug me," Rosa explains. "The ladies in the front hall hug me. It's the simple things that make a big difference. Saying 'Hi 'and 'Good morning.' Dr. Redei is so calm always putting me at ease. He never calls me Mrs. Lacchei. He always calls me Rosa. We have a lot in common, we are all from Europe, and we all once lived in New Jersey. We are all just like family."

"Cancer has a way of stealing control," says Dr. Redei. "It's my job to help return some of that control to my patients. Our team is committed to helping Rosa stay strong and enjoy a good quality of life throughout her treatment so that she and Ettore can travel back and forth to Italy and enjoy life. When she arrives at the hospital with a tomato from her garden, I am just thrilled, as I know the love that went into growing it and the joy she experiences being able to work in her lovely garden. That is what life is all about," he said.

"I was impressed by the first doctor we saw – the doctor who diagnosed me, Dr. Abutalib," Rosa recalls. "He was always smiling. The first day I met him, I was supposed to have a bone biopsy. I received a phone call in my room while the doctor was there. He answered the phone for me and said, 'Your sister-in-law wants to talk to you.' Then he left the room so I could talk to her. 'You need your family now,' he said, and he waited in the hall until the phone call was done. I'd never had a doctor wait for me before."

"And when we meet with Dr. Redei, he always asks first about our family, Rosa's garden, things that make us feel normal and not like cancer is the only thing in our lives. He never acts rushed, and always treats us like individuals. His positive attitude always makes Rosa feel less sick. And he has made some very effective suggestions on how to take medication so that Rosa doesn't feel nauseated. He works closely with the naturopathic practitioner to make natural suggestions that support her body and minimize side effects."

Today, Rosa is feeling well and continuing her treatment. She and Ettore go to the hospital once a month to visit their friends and have her blood tested. She looks forward to the day when she's five years cancer free and her name can be written on a gold leaf to be placed on the Celebration of Life tree in the front entrance hall.

"The first time we went there, I was scared," she says. "The big tree had so many leaves with names on them, and I thought they were the names of those who had died. But I was wrong. They're the names of cancer survivors... like me. And in five years, my name will be on that tree too. I'm looking forward to that."

"I want people to understand the importance of this kind of approach to cancer," says Ettore, who lost his father to lung cancer. "My father never knew that this type of care was available. And I'll bet a lot of people still don't know, especially in Italy where the word 'cancer' is still taboo. People need to know how *good* and *different* Cancer Treatment Centers of America is."