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A Sense of Duty

EDITED BY ELIZABETH WHITTINGTON

After a successful bout with acute lymphocytic leukemia in 2000, Stephanie Perkins, 29, of Walla Walla, Washington, and her family knew what it would take to battle the recurrence that appeared in 2007. A stem cell transplant was the best option for cure, so Stephanie's family members were tested to find a match, including her little brother, a soldier stationed in Iraq. Working with military officials, Army Spc. John Perkins, 27, was able to quickly fly to Washington to see if he was a match to Stephanie.

After testing, John returned to Iraq, but several weeks later, he came home permanently to help care for Stephanie. After the initial plan of rotating caregiving duties between family members fell through, John became his sister's full-time caregiver, helping her through treatment, severe side effects, and recovery.

"It was hard for him to leave his fellow soldiers in Iraq," says Stephanie, who received treatment in Seattle. "It was harder still to be alone with me five hours away from any other family."

Through it all, she says, John was upbeat and inspiring. "I really don't know how he did it."

"It wasn't easy," John says with a laugh, "but at the same time it wasn't too bad, coming from the war zone. It might have seemed overwhelming, but I was used to it."

Now officially out of the military, John says Stephanie's battle with leukemia had a lasting impression on him. After a blood infection left her with a clot in her lungs, Stephanie was in intensive care for a week. John stayed with her at the hospital, hoping for the best, and carefully watching the revolving teams of medical professionals take care of her. "It inspired me to become a respiratory therapist," says John, who is currently taking classes toward the accreditation.

Do you know a patient, survivor, or caregiver we should highlight in The Advocate? If so, e-mail your nomination to editor@curetoday.com.