

# Marcia Stern Savors New Year's Approach

By Cynthia Chapman

For Marcia Stern this High Holiday season brings with it a special sweetness. She is alive and she will be able to spend the Days of Awe in Charlotte with her family and friends. She will be in Temple Israel, where she and her husband Ken have been members since moving to Charlotte 15 years ago, just as she has on other Rosh Hashanahs and Yom Kippurs.

She will see the friends she's made over the years in Sisterhood, B'nai B'rith Women, ORT, Hadassah and the Federation. So why is this New Year sweeter than the others? Because she is alive and filled with awe at the miraculous process of life as she and her family have lived it over the past two years.

Two years ago, life was normal. She was busy, involved in the community and temple, working full-time at Nationsbank Mortgage Corporation and planning her son Jonathan's Bar Mitzvah. Sure, she didn't always feel so well—some dizziness, weight loss—but that wasn't enough to slow her down. Those were the symptoms a person could get for a number of reasons. She just kept going like always. She saw herself as "too busy to be sick." She'd been to the doctor; low hemoglobin, he'd said.

The weekend of Jonathan's Bar Mitzvah arrived. She and Ken were busy with logistics and family. Their daughters Lauren and Kimberly were wrapped up in the family event. But the sore on her foot still hadn't healed and as the weekend continued, it got worse. Relatives were still in town, there were things to do, but the problem with her foot wouldn't go away. Finally, she went to the doctor. In the emergency room the doctor found out her spleen was enlarged.

She began to understand she was sicker than she'd thought.

The next day, she began the morning by worrying that she might lose her foot. But soon that fear changed to a greater one. When the doctor told her she had chronic myelogenous leukemia, she was afraid she would lose her life. She thought about her grandfather; he had died of leukemia. But "I'm too young to die!" she thought.

Suddenly, nothing was normal anymore. The transcendent, joyous experience of seeing Jonathan's Bar Mitzvah was contrasted with the shock of her diagnosis. Ken had to tell the children and the relatives still in town who had come to share their simcha, their joy. Now, it was also time to share their pain, their tsuris.

The medical experts gave her a window of three to five years left



to live. Oral chemotherapy was started immediately.

But just as friends had shared the joy of Jonathan's Bar Mitzvah, they shared the pain of her battle. They rallied around her. Her community of friends in Charlotte supported her. They cleaned her house, did her laundry, brought meals, took her to the doctor; they did it all, whatever needed to be done. The meaning of community became clear; for Marcia Stern and her family. The Charlotte Jewish community is their extended family. Without the support of such friends, who did so many mitzvahs for her, she is sure she would not have survived to see the coming New Year.

Marcia's face lights up, radiant, when she talks about the gift of support and friendship she got from the community. She glows, brighter than a havdalah candle against the darkness. But the darkness is still there. As she puts it, a terminal diagnosis puts a curtain between you and the world. Her illness and all that came with it—the loss of her job, her health, fear of death, a special loneliness because you have a terminal illness—were enough to extinguish hope. But, she told herself, "choose life" as the Torah tells us.

She chose not to give up. She chose not to withdraw. She began to learn all she could about CML, her disease. She wanted to help herself, her family, her friends and community understand the disease and what could be done to confront its assault. It became clear that a bone marrow transplant was the only real chance of a cure. She thought of Hillel's famous words, if not now, when, and became impassioned with a mission. It gave her focus and strength. It gave her family focus and strength. She became determined to teach people about CML and bone marrow transplants. She helped organize bone marrow drives. Because of her efforts and the efforts of others, 3,000-4,000 people in the Charlotte and Carolinas area decided to be typed as marrow donors. That means there is a

potential for each one of those donors to save a life. As it says in the Talmud, if you save one life, it is as if you have saved the world.

All the while, she sought a donor for herself. Her odds of finding a donor were somewhere between 1 in 20,000 and 1 in a million. Bone marrow matches are genetic; six out of six antigens must match or the donation will be rejected by the body. Even her two sisters and mother couldn't be donors. Who can explain the miracle of a genetic match? It is, according to Marcia, one of the mysteries in the universe.

All the while, her leukemia progressed. Her white count was unstable. She was on Interferon. But then, a miracle happened. John Sinni of Southbridge, Massachusetts, a complete stranger to her, turned out to be the perfect match for her. He's not Jewish. Her family's roots are Eastern European. She doesn't know about his. How can this be, that a complete stranger has the gift of a genetic match that can save your life? Marcia can't explain it, but she understands that bone marrow matches transcend boundaries. Race and religion fall away, ethnicity and family fall away—all that's left is the miracle of a process that saves a life and links two people together in a unique bond.

On April 21, 1994 John Sinni's bone marrow became part of her. The gift was anonymous; donors and recipients do not begin by knowing each other's names. According to Maimonides, this is one of the highest levels of charity, the giver and receiver do not know each other. Marcia sent her donor a silver Chai on a chain and wrote a letter to explain its meaning—life.

Her friends continued to support her emotionally. She got hundreds of cards from well-wishers, some from complete strangers across the Carolinas who had heard her story. She's kept them all. Marcia Stern believes the community "created the pieces of the puzzle of her healing." What she and her family have experienced in the last two years has "renewed" her faith in human nature.

Don't be fooled. Marcia is not cured yet. She still deals daily with medical problems. Her weakened immune system last year forced her to miss High Holidays in temple with family and friends. That is why this year has a special sweetness, with each moment of life savored like a drop of honey. And, like a honey cake at Rosh Hashanah, there is a special treat for her family this year. They got to meet John Sinni, her marrow donor, in August. He arrived the



Marcia Stern

weekend of August 15 and her children were excited about meeting him. Her daughter Kimberly told him on the phone, "Thank you for marrowing my mother!"

Thank you, indeed, John Sinni. Thank you for giving Marcia Stern's friends and family the chance to have her here in our lives a little longer. The loss of one in our community is a loss to us all. And, Marcia, thank you for sharing your story, and your life, with us.

Our liturgy for the Days of Awe is dramatic. G-d opens the Book of Life, we read, and knows who will perish in the coming year by flood, by fire, and we could amend the list with categories of our own. Most of the time, we read those phrases and don't think much about them. This year, Marcia, we will think of you and others we know who continue to struggle against serious illness.

May we all be inscribed for a year of blessings and vitality. L'shana tova tikatevu.

## The Annual Jewish Community Service

The Annual Jewish Community Service will be held at the Hebrew Cemetery on McCall Street in Charlotte at 2:00 pm on September 8. The community is invited to attend.

## Candle Lighting Times in September

September 6  
7:25 pm Shabbat

September 13  
7:15 pm Shabbat/Erev  
Rosh Hashanah

September 14  
8:16 pm Rosh  
Hashanah

September 20  
7:08 pm Shabbat

September 22  
7:20 pm Erev Yom  
Kippur

September 27  
6:58 pm Shabbat/Erev  
Sukkot

September 28  
7:56 pm Sukkot

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John Sinni and family.



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