

ST. LOUIS WOMAN COULD BE TICKET TO BLESSED WILLIAM JOSEPH CHAMINADE'S CANONIZATION

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Rachel Lozano sometimes feels a sense of disbelief that her life is a miracle.

After suffering three bouts of a rare form of sarcoma, a cancer that affects the connective tissue, the 27-year-old has been declared cancer-free for the past six years.

Her survival is being attributed to the claim of a miracle through the intercession of Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, founder of the Society of Mary (Marianists).

Last week, the archdiocese and the Marianists closed their canonical investigation into the alleged miracle. The findings from that investigation will be presented to the Vatican's Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

If declared an authentic miracle, it would be the final step needed for Blessed Chaminade's canonization.

That leaves Lozano with "an amazing feeling." She said the experience has strengthened her faith as a Catholic.

A rare diagnosis

Lozano's first diagnosis with cancer was in December 1998. She was 15 and a sophomore at St. Joseph's Academy in Frontenac. Doctors discovered it was an Askin's tumor, a rare, malignant cancer affecting the chest wall. She had emergency surgery, followed by chemotherapy and six weeks of daily radiation. Sometimes, she had both radiation and chemo therapies at the same time.

Lozano recalled the generous support she received from family and friends. Members of her parish family at Our Lady of the Pillar in Creve Coeur volunteered to bring meals to the house. She was grateful for the support of her doctor, Robert Bergamini, and the staff at the Cardinal's Kids Cancer

Center in Creve Coeur, for their holistic approach to her illness, including the art therapy sessions that inspired Lozano to pursue the subject for a master's degree this fall.

In 2001, the cancer came back, this time in her bone marrow. Intense chemotherapy in the first half of 2001 forced her to miss the second half of her senior year. That June, doctors recommended an autologous stem-cell transplant, which meant stem cells from her own body would be used to treat her cancer.

The procedure almost killed her. She spent months afterward recovering. "I pretty much had to learn how to eat and walk again," she recalled.

The following year would prove that the treatment was not successful. In November 2002, doctors discovered a tumor had reappeared, this time in the area of her heart, lungs and spine. It was about the size of a small Nerf football, Lozano said.

Doctors told her that nobody had survived a relapse of an Askin's tumor cancer after a stem-cell transplant. They "They said it would be a few weeks, maybe a few months max," she said.

Her body reached a threshold of the amount of radiation and chemotherapy her body could handle. "My body couldn't take it anymore," she said. Hospice was recommended by other experts in the oncology field.

Eventually the weeks turned into months, and Lozano's health wasn't going downhill, as doctors expected. Finally, after a year of living with the tumor, a PET scan was ordered, which showed the tumor had "little to no activity." A second scan was ordered a month later, which showed the same results.

"I kept living and I was active," Lozano recalled. "They thought it was strange the whole time. They really didn't expect me to make it."

In May 2004, Dr. Mark Blucher, a well-known surgeon who had just moved from the East Coast to St. John's Mercy Medical Center in Creve Coeur, removed the tumor.

The Marianist connection

During the course of her treatments, Lozano was one of two teens from her parish chosen to fly to Rome for the beatification of William Joseph Chaminade, founder of the Marianists. His intercession had been attributed to the cure of an Argentine woman's lung cancer. Our Lady of the Pillar's pastor, Marianist Father James Tobin, accompanied the group on the September 2000 trip.

Lozano, who was still in her senior year at St. Joseph's, said that the trip was "touch and go." A few months before they were to head to Rome, she started feeling symptoms of what would become a diagnosis of cancer in her bone marrow. She was experiencing hip pain, but eventually made the decision to go. It was her first time abroad.

Lozano, who said she knew of Blessed Chaminade from growing up in a Marianist parish, said she felt an instant connection to the French priest, who died in 1850. "I started praying more" after the experience, she added. "I left feeling very peaceful." Family and friends stepped up their prayers for her health, specifically asking for Blessed Chaminade's intercession.

It wasn't until long after the group returned from Rome that Father Tobin had noticed Lozano's improvement in health. Conversations led to questions about whether Blessed Chaminade truly could have interceded. The priest wrote his superior general at the time, Father David Fleming. They decided to formally look into whether a miracle could have happened.

The investigation

Because the alleged miracle took place within the boundaries of the archdiocese, the Marianist community contacted Archbishop Robert J. Carlson to open an investigation.

Msgr. John Shamleffer, judicial vicar for the archdiocese, explained that the process for investigating an alleged miracle has a prescribed course, as defined by the Vatican's Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

In April, a six-member tribunal was formed, including canon lawyers and medical experts with no ties to Lozano's treatment. Msgr. Shamleffer, who served as the episcopal delegate on the tribunal, said that numerous individuals had been interviewed over the course of several months, including family and friends who prayed for her and the physicians who treated Lozano. The meetings wrapped up earlier this month.

Last Friday, an evening Vespers service was held at Our Lady of the Pillar to mark the official closing of the investigation. Msgr. Shamleffer said the purpose is to "certify everything and attest to the truthfulness of the witnesses and the process. The information is then sent to the Congregation, and they make the determination of whether or not this is a miraculous cure."

The wait

Its not clear when the Vatican will make a decision, said Msgr. Shamleffer. "The last time our archdiocese had this happen was in the 1880s, so we really don't have experience in how long this process takes."

The priest called the experience one of "grace and prayer. I think it's a wonderful faith experience to believe that God works in these miraculous ways. It's a source of joy and faith, both for this young woman, for the Marianist community, for the parish, the archdiocese and the whole Church."

Father Tobin called last weekend's prayer service "an incredible moment in knowing we had come this far." Ultimately, "you hope and pray for Rachel's good health, whether or not (the miracle) is acknowledged by the Vatican. If the Church does, that's great. But the fact that Rachel is living is a miracle in and of itself."

Blessed Chaminade, through this experience, continues to serve as "an inspiration" to the Church, said Father Tobin. "Blessed Chaminade continues his legacy to keep us mission driven and inspired by his commitment to serve the Church with a deep love for Mary, a strong spirit of faith, and reaching out to build communities of faith. There is a special moment in this."

Previous miracle in St. Louis

This is not the first time a reported miracle has taken place in the Archdiocese of St. Louis.

In 1861, a German immigrant and factory worker by the name of Ignatius Strecker injured his breastbone, and soon after a tumor-like inflammation began to grow. Signs also pointed to tuberculosis in his lungs. Treatments were unsuccessful, and he was given weeks to live.

Strecker came to the St. Joseph Parish Downtown (now Shrine of St. Joseph) in 1864, where he was blessed by a relic of then-Blessed Peter Claver. Within weeks, he was healed from his ailments.

In 1886, the miracle was declared authentic and was chosen as one of two miracles required for the canonization process of St. Peter Claver.