

# Sister hopes to give brother gift of life

By **ROSCOE BARNES III**

*Staff Writer*

**Waynesboro** - Twelve years ago, when Michelle Bender needed a blood transfusion, her big brother, Stephen, came to her rescue.

Today, Stephen needs help and Michelle is returning it in a big way.

Stephen, 37, who had been in remission from Hodgkin's Disease, has had a relapse needs a bone marrow transplant - the second transplant in less than a year. His sister, Michelle, 30, is the perfect match.

Stephen lives with his parents, Gerry and Lee Bender, at 185 Antietam Drive in Wayne Heights.

His whole family was tested to see if they were a match, including James, Michelle's twin brother, Stephen noted.

Only Michelle matched, and in November or December, she will travel with her brother to Nashville or Seattle for the procedure.

The single mother of two said she realizes there are risks.

"And there's always the fear of the unknown and possible side effects," she said "But I always knew I would do it if we were a match. I have to. He's my brother."

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To complete the process, Stephen is expected to be at the hospital for at least four months, while his sister will spend a minimum of two months there.

Stephen said he is grateful and his parents are proud of Michelle.

## **The first assault**

Stephen was first diagnosed with Hodgkin's Disease in May 1996. At the same time, he learned cancer had assaulted every part of his body.

Poised to launch an all-out attack on the disease. Bender underwent chemotherapy and took his doctors' advice. He underwent a bone marrow transplant.

"The doctors felt we should be aggressive in attacking the disease," Stephen said. "He said I had a better chance of survival if it returned after a year, but if it returned sooner, it would spell trouble."

As Stephen prepared to make the trip to Nashville, where he received the transplant, he spent hours thinking about his family - his teen-age daughter, Stephenie and his ex-wife.

## **Dismissing worry**

Not one to throw in the towel. Stephen dismissed his worries and tried to move with his life. In addition to starting an at home Internet business, he kept busy with volunteer work.

Throughout (Waynesboro's) Bicentennial celebration, he was often seen sporting a thick dark beard and carrying a digital camera. He climbed steps and maneuvered through crowds to record the action.

But at the same time, his health was deteriorating.

"Most people didn't know I was sick," he said, noting he never sought sympathy but admitting the work was draining.

As his condition grew worse, Stephen, a member of Glen Furney Assembly of God Church, found strength through prayer and support from Christians throughout the community.

In November 1997, he received his bone marrow transplant in Nashville.

Instead of using donated marrow, doctors used Stephen's own marrow, which they had "harvested."

A few month later - and many pounds lighter, a bald Stephen wearing a medical mask, continued to work when he could. He found the strength to help people like Scott Painter, a Waynesboro 19-year-old who's struggling with aplastic anemia.

Despite his own weakened condition, Stephen set out to raise money for Painter and the young man's family.

### **It returns**

For a while, everything seemed to be looking up. He regained weight. He picked up strength and started to plow forward with various projects.

"During that time, my daughter and I became close," noting his wife had moved out of the area.

Then, about two months ago the problems resurfaced.

"I started feeling bad," he said.

"I knew in May there was a problem," added his mother. "He started losing weight again."

Stephen returned to see his doctor and got the news he feared: The cancer was back - and this time with a vengeance.

Everyone was shocked, including the doctor.

"He said it had returned to soon after the transplant," Stephen said. "He was also surprised that it came back in such an aggressive manner. That's rare."

"I was devastated," said Stephen's mother, the tears swelling up in her eyes.

Stephenie, Stephen's daughter also was upset. "Here we go again," she said.

Remembering what the doctors told him. Stephen knew his chances of survival were running low.

"With the first transplant, I had an 85 percent chance of survival in 20 years," Stephen said. "Now, I have less than 25 percent in five years."

As Stephen Prepares for his second bone marrow transplant. He's praying for his health, as well as for the doctors who will treat him.

"I've turned it over to God, he said, "I'm letting him handle it."