



LifeLock This Tax Season... Help Protect Your Identity
 Sign up for LifeLock® Service & get H&R Block At Home Deluxe Edition for Free*
 *Offer is for new annual enrollments only. One per household. Email address must be included to receive H&R Block At Home Deluxe Edition. Please allow 2 weeks for delivery.

SIGN UP



Home » News » Wisconsin

He's in the Army now

Wife's cancer prompts man to enlist

By Mark Johnson of the Journal Sentinel

Posted: Oct. 18, 2009 | (0) COMMENTS

enlarge photo



Michael Sears

Michelle Caudle (right) is comforted by her mother-in-law, Marguerite Hemiller. Family members were accompanying

56 days . . . 55 days . . . 54 days . . .

Chelsea Caudle began signing her text messages this summer with a countdown. At 14 years old, she knew no better way to express what was coming. Day Zero was to be Oct. 7, the day Dad left for Army basic training in Fort Jackson, S.C. He was moving 950 miles from their home in Watertown, 950 miles from Mom.

He was leaving, even though Mom was sick with ovarian cancer. Even though he had been at her side through two long, miserable rounds of chemotherapy. Even though she now faced the likelihood of a third.

In fact, Dad was leaving *because* Mom was sick.

In March, he was laid off from his job as a raw materials coordinator for a plastics

Tools



TEXT SIZE

Yahoo! Buzz Newsvine
 reddit Digg it
 Delicious Technorati
 facebook Mixx

TOP STORIES

advertisement

- State's economy suffers as new car sales plummet
- MATC students learn that being a pastry chef is no piece of cake
- Wood admits to drunken driving while fighting to stay in the Assembly
- Robbery led to triple

Michelle's husband, Bill (left), at the Watertown Army recruiting office, as he waited for the shuttle to take him to the Milwaukee military processing station.

more photos



Follow up coverage

- [Caudle family copes with cancer, basic training](#)

Video Preview

Forum

What do you think of the Caudles' decision? **Join the discussion in our forum**, then check back to see what others had to say

company called PolyOne, where he'd worked for 20 years. His severance package had provided several months' salary, but by August the paychecks were winding down. Soon the cost of his family health coverage was going to triple, then a few months after that, nearly triple again. They needed coverage so Mom could fight her cancer.

Dad's solution: a four-year hitch in the Army.

So Chelsea counted down the days to his departure. When the countdown reached 49, the text message signature began to annoy and depress her, so she stopped. High school was beginning, her freshman year.

In the first week of class, one of the teachers asked: *What do your parents do?*

The question jolted Chelsea back to the shifting ground of her family. Mom was working part time at a Culver's restaurant, preparing for more chemo, worrying about how to pay the bills. In less than six weeks, Dad would enter the Army and her care would be covered.

The tradeoff was that he would be far away when Mom needed him home, when Chelsea needed him, too. He would miss all of her high school years. The band performances. Prom.

Chelsea thought of all his absence would mean.

When she sent her next text message, she resumed the countdown.

36 days.

Mom and Dad are Michelle and Bill Caudle, high school sweethearts now 40 and 39, respectively. They have three children: Chelsea, the youngest; Alysha, a 21-year-old working at a nearby Holiday Inn; and Little Bill, an 18-year-old ex-high school wrestler.

The Caudles are not fond of politics. Michelle and Bill have paid little attention to the shouting this summer over health care reform. They have not gone to any of the town hall meetings. They are well aware that politicians and interest groups would like to trumpet their story or dismiss it to score points in the debate - and they would just as soon avoid all of that.

[homicide, police think](#)

- [Walker winning in privatization battle](#)

MORE NEWS

- [State's economy suffers as new car sales plummet](#)
- [Walker winning in privatization battle](#)
- [Train plant in Milwaukee may yield more benefits](#)
- [Robbery led to triple homicide, police think](#)
- [Robertson's role in homicides remains a mystery](#)
- [Senate approves benefits for jobless](#)
- [Senate passes bill requiring mental status check by gun dealers](#)
- [MPS budget panel gets an earful](#)

Most Popular - News

[most read](#) [e-mailed](#)

- [Robbery led to triple homicide, police think](#)
- [Walker winning in privatization battle](#)
- [Robertson's role in homicides remains a mystery](#)
- [Teen was sleeping when stabbed to death, complaint says](#)

Health care help

Workers who have been laid off can seek help with health coverage from several places. BadgerCare Plus, the state's public health insurance program, has a Web site: www.badgercareplus.org. On the site, there is a link to help you determine if you are eligible, another that allows you to apply online and another that lists community organizations that can help you enroll. BadgerCare Plus also has a members hotline at (800) 362-3002. Information about the federal COBRA program that helps laid-off workers receive health coverage can be found at www.dol.gov/dol/topic/health-plans/cobra.htm. This site offers an overview of the program as well as answers to frequently asked questions.

Trust Fund

A fund has been set up at Associated Bank to help the Caudles with their medical bills. Donations can be mailed to the Associated Bank of Watertown, 600 E. Main St., Watertown, WI. 53094, under the name Michelle Caudle Benefit Trust.

"We're not activists," Michelle said.

But this year the national story of lost jobs became their story. And the saga of families losing health insurance was about to become theirs, too.

Except that Bill wouldn't let it.

True, he had been interested in the Army for years. And he could always request an emergency leave to come home if Michelle's condition grew dire (Army regulations allow this if a family member's death is imminent).

But for weeks before enlisting, Bill had sought other options. He revised his résumé. He answered "help wanted" ads, then watched the companies cut workers instead of hiring them. He interviewed for one job that would have paid \$13 an hour - less than half of what he was making at PolyOne. He didn't get the job.

Finally, on May 13, his 39th birthday, he signed the Army papers.

He remembers thinking: *What did I do?*

Chelsea learned about her dad's decision when Michelle picked her up from school. It had been a bad day already: a problem with one of her teachers, then she had to do the mile run.

"I have something to tell you," her mom said after Chelsea slid into her seat. "Your dad enlisted in the Army. There's more: He'll be gone for four years."

Chelsea started to cry.

Two weeks later, Michelle Caudle sat in the office of her doctor, Peter Johnson, at Aurora Women's Pavilion in West Allis. Johnson has been an oncologist for 13 years, and despite the immeasurable sorrow that comes with treating cancer, he loves the work for the hope in it. He has shared the joy of patients who've lived to see birthdays, anniversaries, and the graduations and weddings of their children.

On this particular day, Michelle's latest tests had come back. Just six months earlier she'd celebrated the end of her second chemotherapy treatment. Now, the tests revealed tiny "spots," or changes on her abdomen, neck and lungs. Not a good sign. The measure upon which cancer hopes rise and fall, the CA125 number - *Please, let it stay low* - was climbing.

▪ [Missing cat leaves couple heartsick](#)

» [more most popular content...](#)

Sponsored Links

Yellow Teeth: Fixed for \$1.99*

Don't get ripped off by the dentist, learn one mom's teeth trick

www.ConsumersTeethReport.com

Acai Berry Diet (SHOCKER)

Warning! This Shocking Health Report Reveals The Truth About Acai Berry

ConsumersHealthReports.com

Penny Stock Soaring 3000%

Sign up for Free to find out what the next 3000% Stock Winner Is!

www.PennyStocksUniverse.com

"I could lie to you but I'm not going to," Johnson told Michelle.

Although he could not say for certain the cancer was back, this early sign pointed to that possibility. The doctor compared her cancer to a chronic disease that would never be completely vanquished from the body.

Michelle broke down. For three years she'd been nurturing her hope in the face of uncertainty.

"I'm not going to beat this," she said.

Ovarian cancer is a stealth disease, shadowy and overshadowed.

Years of publicity about breast cancer have empowered women with the knowledge that they can catch the disease early by performing a self-exam.

Ovarian cancer has garnered just a fraction of the publicity, and the message has been decidedly more negative. There is no self-exam. By the time ovarian cancer has announced its presence, the disease has often progressed to the third of the four cancer stages. Once a woman has been diagnosed, her odds of surviving five years are less than 50-50. All told, the disease kills about 15,000 American women every year.

On Nov. 14, 2006, the day Michelle first walked into Johnson's office, she thought she had a cyst. Her abdomen felt tender and she was constipated. No one had said "cancer." Still, she had been referred to an oncologist and she was scared.

A CT scan showed a large mass, about 8 inches in diameter. Her CA125 level, which measures cancer antigens, was 21 times higher than it should have been.

The next day she went into surgery. Johnson spent more than four hours removing as much of the cancer as he could.

From that day forward, Michelle and Bill had a new job that superseded any other: fighting cancer.

Although the disease was hers, he would assume responsibility for meals and laundry and the things she'd always done but was too tired and sick to do now. Michelle passed some of the days curled up on the recliner, drained and queasy. Bill worked around her, cooking hot dogs and other simple meals. Chelsea made spaghetti and chicken.

Bill went with Michelle to her doctor appointments, surgeries and chemotherapies. When the cancer returned in 2008, he sat beside her as the doctor discussed what to try next.

He felt he had to be "the strong one," so when she cried, he did not.

Of all Bill's responsibilities, one rose above the others:

Health coverage.

The March 2009 layoff was announced months before it took place. Though the news was jolting, Bill thought maybe it wouldn't be so bad. He'd wanted a job a little closer to home than PolyOne, 30 miles away in Sussex. Now he could find something better.

But it had been a long time since he applied for work or sat for an interview. What do you tell people about yourself?

After sending out résumés, he got the feeling it didn't much matter. Even companies that had advertised for staff were changing their minds.

By the second week at home, he was struggling to find things to do. He cleaned the kitchen. He vacuumed. He exercised. He logged onto the computer and checked job sites.

The president's stimulus bill was helping laid off workers pay for the health coverage they had while employed. Between this assistance and Bill's severance package from PolyOne, the Caudles initially paid \$136 a month for their coverage.

But in September, when Bill's severance package ended, they would pay \$497.

In January, when they would be on their own: \$1,370.

Bill needed a job. He needed health benefits. And a cursory look persuaded him that the answer would not be BadgerCare Plus, Wisconsin's public health insurance program.

Besides, he was leaning toward another idea, one that presented the Caudles with a quandary. The Army would solve their health coverage problem. In years past he would have been too old, but in 2005 the age limit for enlistment was increased from 35 to 40, and a year later it was raised again to 42. The tradeoff would be his absence from home.

In the end, although he risked leaving Michelle to fight cancer on her own, Bill chose the Army. He signed on for a job as a signal support systems specialist, a soldier who works with communications equipment.

"Seventy percent of the reason is for the insurance," said Bill's mother, Marguerite Hemiller. "He told me, 'I've always wanted to do something for my country and I have to help Michelle.' "

Enjoy the summer, Johnson had advised Michelle in May when they got the first inkling her cancer might be back yet again. There was no emergency, no need to hurry into another round of chemo. Not yet.

So Michelle tried to live her life as if cancer and health coverage were not calling the shots. She continued working at Culver's in Watertown. She enjoyed the return of her auburn hair after the previous rounds of chemo. She spent time with her husband and children, though it was not always easy to avoid reminders of what they were facing.

Bill began a vigorous program of jogging, pushups and exercises to prepare for basic training. Once a week, he went to the Army recruiting office in Watertown to train with other recruits.

In August, they celebrated a friend's wedding. As they slow-danced at the reception, Michelle wondered how many dances they had left. She leaned close to Bill's ear.

"That'll have to be good for the next four years," she said.

Bill reminded her they had another wedding in two weeks. Also, they had a week coming up at a cabin in the Great Smoky Mountains with Chelsea, Little Bill and Michelle's parents.

The vacation in Tennessee was a last chance for the kind of closeness the family would have to manage without.

Bill and his son went four-wheeling in the mountains. He took Chelsea horseback riding along a forest trail. Riding single file was not conducive to long conversations, so they savored the quiet.

Michelle and Bill had their time, too, sitting together at the cabin, then white-water rafting down the Pigeon River. Michelle enjoyed the cool spray on her face. The future stretched only as far as the next bend in the river.

One day they all hiked up Clingmans Dome, an elevation of 6,600 feet. There were benches every tenth of a mile or so. Michelle had to sit frequently. She found it hard to watch her parents, both in their 60s, waiting for her.

She had been trying to forget about being sick.

On Aug. 27 - 41 days - *Michelle's summer ended.* She sat with Bill in a private room in Aurora Women's Pavilion waiting for the official word on her latest blood tests. The doctor's office had called to tell her that her CA125, the cancer measure she hoped to keep low, had risen from 17 to 66.

"Odds are he's going to tell me it's back," she said.

Johnson entered the room and crouched beside Michelle's chair. There was cancer in her abdomen, he said. "There's some areas in the lung, too."

"Oh no."

"Not a lot," the doctor continued. "There's one area in the right side. There's a little area on the left side. None of these are big. We're talking three-eighths of an inch."

Michelle's eyes went watery. The nurse reached for a tissue.

"You know what? I brought my own," Michelle said, and her smile let everyone know it was OK to laugh. For a moment they did.

Johnson said there was no single area to go after surgically, but Michelle had responded well to chemotherapy. His soft voice outlined the chemo plan. "I'd suggest we start fairly soon," he said. Right after Labor Day.

Michelle bowed her head and Johnson leaned toward her.

"I'm sorry," he said.

During the car ride back to Watertown, Michelle told Bill there was one thing she wished she could do.

"I'd like to be a grandmother. I'd be a really good grandmother."

At home, Michelle wrote six words on her Facebook page:

"Cancer back. Sucks to be me."

35 days.

"I'm going to blow the whistle and you are going to jog."

Staff Sgt. Larry Finefield stood before Bill and half a dozen other recruits on an empty soccer field in Watertown on a cloudless September afternoon. Finefield called out each new exercise. The recruits shouted back in unison, then went to work.

Bill was surrounded by teenagers, kids who could have gone to school with Little Bill - in fact, one had. After 10 minutes of pushups, leg lifts and other drills, Bill's face reddened. Sweat beaded along his forehead. The teenagers were straining, too. Each time they jogged, a chorus of panting filled the air. An hour later, they finished by sprinting pass patterns one-by-one as Finefield hurled the football downfield.

"All right guys," Finefield shouted finally. "We're done."

This was a taste of what Bill could expect at basic training. He was building up his body.

20 days.

Michelle was more than a week into her new round of chemo. The exhausting ritual was familiar and she tried to approach it with humor.

"They have to draw my blood first to see if I'm healthy enough to be poisoned," she said one morning as she waited to be treated.

Chemotherapy destroys healthy cells as it attacks cancerous ones.

That's why nurses had to measure Michelle's white blood cells, red blood cells and platelets to be sure that she had recovered sufficiently from the previous dose and could receive the next without risking life-threatening complications.

And that's why Michelle's stomach churned and her energy vanished. The previous Sunday, she had gone back to sleeping in the recliner for a simple reason: "When you sleep, you don't feel sick."

As she slept, Bill cooked and cleaned. When she woke, he asked what she wanted.

"Who's going to baby me?" Michelle asked, anticipating the days ahead.

Now, as she sat beside Bill, waiting for the next dose of chemo, she still had no answer.

The pale liquid arrived in an IV bag. The pump pulsed, emitting a soft, mechanical whir as the liquid flowed. Michelle talked about going to work at Culver's. Might take her mind off things.

The bag was empty, the poison inside her. On the way to the car, she told Bill she might look for a new hat.

"I have a feeling I'm going to need it."

11 days.

The cake was for Bill, but the party was as much for Michelle. In the chemo cycle - two weeks on, one off - this was her break from the poison. She was ready to feel good again.

Friends and relatives arrived at the Caudles' backyard carrying dishes. Bill shook hands. Michelle wandered back and forth between the kitchen and the yard, smiling and laughing. She stayed on her feet until just about everyone else was seated.

"She's a strong woman," said her mother, Sharon Hutchins.

Both Hutchins and Bill's mother, Marguerite Hemiller, have accompanied Michelle to her cancer treatments. Hemiller, a nurse for 27 years, remembered that during the first months of chemo, Michelle would stand in the parking lot crying, not wanting to go inside. Now, Hemiller felt conflicted about her son's decision to join the Army.

"One half of me says, 'Go.' The other half says, 'You'd better stay,' " she said. "I know he's got to do it. He's got to get that insurance."

Hemiller lived without insurance for two years after she lost her job late in 2006. When she did not feel well, she diagnosed herself. That would not be an option for her daughter-in-law.

At the party, Michelle wore her birthday present from Bill: a Green Bay Packers jersey with the number of her favorite player, defensive end Johnny Jolly. Her birthday was still a few weeks away on Oct. 20, but by then Bill would be gone.

After dinner, friends and family sliced up a "Farewell Bill" cake decorated with an eagle clutching arrows and a shield.

There were no songs, no toasts.

"We're kind of quiet," Michelle said.

By evening, most of the guests were gone. The Caudles lighted a fire in their outdoor fireplace and sat around talking until it was time for bed.

6 days.

Oct. 1, Chelsea's 15th birthday. A balloon and flower bouquet waited for her on the dining room table. Chelsea was at a football game.

In the living room, Michelle lay in her recliner, huddled under a blanket. She had turned the television way down, but the glow from the screen flickered over her, the only light in a dark room.

The chemo, administered two days earlier, had hit full force, nausea overwhelming her. During earlier rounds of chemo, Bill had tried to talk with her, to distract her. Now he knew better. He left her alone.

Posted on the door of the refrigerator were the doctor's orders and the date of her next appointment: Oct. 6. The same day the recruiter would take Bill to Milwaukee before his flight to South Carolina.

"It doesn't seem real yet," Bill said, coming in from the garage where he had been cleaning. "I don't know if I feel anything yet."

In the dining room, he had the list of things to bring: comfortable clothing, socks, underwear, shampoo, soap, deodorant, toothpaste, disposable shaver, \$50, Social Security card, birth certificate and marriage certificate.

"I'm scared for when you leave," his daughter Alysha said.

Bill knew how the family felt. To help them prepare, he had written lists of the tasks they would have to pick up when he was gone. Weekly jobs: "garbage, cleaning the bathrooms and bedrooms, laundry, vacuuming." Biweekly: "dusting, cleaning the shower, recyclables." Monthly: "cleaning windows, running computer disk cleanup."

Seasonal: "mowing the lawn, shoveling snow, switching the furnace from summer to winter, then winter to summer."

Little Bill had arranged the night's dinner, a rotisserie chicken that came free with the purchase of 10 packages of Rice-A-Roni. Bill ate alone at the dining room table. Michelle slept. Then her cell phone began beeping.

A text message from Chelsea. The football game was over. "Get me."

Michelle called to her husband.

Bill grabbed the keys and headed to the garage.

Day Zero.

The separation came sooner than Chelsea had expected.

Her dad was not scheduled to fly to basic training until Oct. 7, but a day earlier he had to report to the recruiting office where a van would take him to Milwaukee. The recruits would be driven to a hotel in the city so that early the next day, they could be processed, sworn in and flown to their base.

Bill's family would not be there on the 7th. Hard enough to face one farewell. No one had the stomach for a second.

Besides, separation wasn't the family's only misery scheduled for Oct. 6. Hours before Bill left, Michelle was to receive her next dose of chemo. Bill planned to accompany her to the hospital. Chelsea, too.

This time, however, Michelle's blood tests were not good. She was not healthy enough to be poisoned. She would have to skip a week.

So, on a rainy morning, everyone, including Bill's mother and stepfather, waited in Watertown, watching the clock tick closer to 1 p.m. and his appointment at the recruiting office.

Less than an hour remained. Bill hooked up the camera to the TV and they watched a slide show of images from the past year. Here was Little Bill at his high school prom and graduation, and Chelsea at confirmation. Here was the Fourth of July parade, Chelsea marching with the band and holding the flag. Here was the trip to the Great Smoky Mountains - the cabin, four-wheeling with Little Bill, horseback riding with Chelsea.

"This is me dying," Michelle said, smiling at a photo of the climb up Clingmans Dome.

"You made it," Bill said.

When the slide show returned to Little Bill's prom, the family stood up to go. Bill grabbed his backpack. The long goodbye moved to the recruiting office.

The van was late. Michelle straightened her husband's jacket and hugged him. She talked about the last few months, how strange it had felt to have him home during the day instead of away at work. It would feel stranger still not to have him around at all.

"I'll find out how many times I say, 'I don't know. Ask your Dad. That's your Dad's department,' " she said.

Just before 2:30, the van arrived.

"Butterflies are coming back," Bill said, excusing himself for a last trip to the restroom.

The driver checked IDs, consulted his clipboard, then eyed Bill and the other recruit.

"You ready?"

Chelsea and her Dad hugged. It happened so quickly; all she could say was: "Bye."

In the parking lot, tears streamed down Michelle's face. She held Bill near the van, unable to find any words at all.

"I love you," Bill said. "I'll call."

And then he was gone.

On the ride home, Chelsea texted her cousin and her best friend.

My Dad just left.

No signature this time. The countdown was over.

Early the next morning, Bill Caudle learned that he would not be going to Fort Jackson, S.C. He was headed to Fort Knox, Ky., instead. He would be half as far from home - 475 miles instead of 950.

The moment he was processed at Fort Knox, his Army health coverage kicked in.

Having missed a week of chemo, Michelle is scheduled to return for treatment Tuesday. Her birthday. "Not exactly where you want to spend your birthday," she said, managing a grin.

If all went according to schedule, Bill would finish basic training in mid-December. Michelle would still be in the midst of chemo. She hoped to make it to his graduation.

Post a comment

We encourage your comments but will strive to remove discussion that contains personal attacks, racial slurs, profanity or other inappropriate material as outlined in our [guidelines](#). We post-moderate comments on most content, but may choose to pre-moderate some comments so please be patient if you don't see yours appear right way. We also ask for your help by reporting comments you think are inappropriate.

Please [login](#) or [register](#) to post a comment.



E-mail Newsletter

The latest local news delivered to your inbox Monday-Friday during the 2 p.m. hour.

enter your e-mail address

Sign Up Now!

Enter your e-mail address above and click "Sign Up Now!" to begin receiving your e-mail newsletter

[Login](#) or [Register](#) to manage all your newsletter preferences.

Elsewhere on JSOnline

Cooking 101



Test your kitchen knowledge

2010 Auto Show



Greater Milwaukee Auto Show preview

Readers' Picks



Best Japanese restaurants

Winter Olympics



Coverage of the Vancouver Games

Wedding Day



Wedding photos by local photographers

Recipe Database



Search, print, rate Journal Sentinel recipes

advertisement



I love this Country.™

Spring Vacation Get-Away

Stay 2 nights, get the 3rd night free!

[Book Now >](#)

[JSOnline](#) | [MyCommunityNOW](#) | [Living Lake Country](#) | [SportsBubbler](#) | [MilwaukeeMoms](#) | [Today's TMJ4](#) | [Newsradio 620](#) | [94.5 Lake FM](#)

PRIVACY POLICY/YOUR CALIFORNIA PRIVACY RIGHTS

| [Terms of Use](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Subscription Services](#) | [Place an Ad](#) | [About Our Ads](#)

© 2010, Journal Sentinel Inc. All rights reserved.

Powered by Clickability.

Produced and Managed by Journal Interactive.

