

Jacob Needed an Angel

by Sharon Johnson O'Donnell

My father and I were standing together at the back of our church near Raleigh, NC, as we waited to take the traditional walk down the aisle. It was my wedding day, and I started to get misty-eyed as I thought of how life had brought me to this point.

Ahead of us was my 3-year-old nephew and ring bearer, Jacob, pacing carefully toward the altar. People smiled as they caught a glimpse of the serious-looking toddler, balancing a ring on his satin pillow. There is a photo of Jacob in my wedding album that always brings back this wonderful memory. He is dressed in a white suit, and his sky-blue eyes have never been bluer. He looks so innocent, and his face is the essence of childhood.

EAST-FORWARD FIVE YEARS to a dreary night in April 1993. The University of North Carolina had just won the national basketball championship, but I wasn't celebrating; I was sitting outside my house in the pouring rain, screaming and crying because I had just been told that Jacob might die.

The phone call came while I was watching the game on TV. "They say it's definitely leukemia," my mother said.

"Oh, God, Mama, no," I moaned. Then I asked about my sister Gail and her husband, Butch—Jacob's parents. "They're devastated," Mama said.

I handed the phone to my husband, Kevin, and ran into the yard. As I sat in the rain, I realized I had used the word

Earlier this year, my nephew Jacob celebrated his fifteenth birthday—an amazing milestone, if you know how close we came to losing him



The author with Jacob: She pitched in when his life was on the line.

devastated much too casually over the years. I could remember saying things like "I'm devastated that I don't have a date" or "I'm devastated about not getting that job." That night, I learned what the word truly means.

Images of my nephew rushed into my mind: Jacob playing Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer in his preschool Christmas pageant; Jacob as a Little Leaguer, waving to us in the stands; and Jacob at the recent church Easter egg hunt, helping his brothers, Sam, 5, and Matthew, 3, look for

eggs. As I looked back on it, I realized he'd been a little pale, but it was hard to believe he was now fighting for his life.

Back in the house, I went to sit by my 2-year-old son, Billy, as he slept. I thought about how fragile we all are, and my feelings of helplessness were overwhelming.

THE NEXT DAY, MY PARENTS WERE ALLOWED to see Jacob at the hospital. Afterward they stopped by our house, and I peppered them with questions. "How is he?" I asked. Daddy's eyes teared up—something I'd never seen. Mama told us that Jacob had the most common type of childhood leukemia, which has a cure rate of about 90 percent; but he also had an extremely high white-cell count, meaning the cancer was very much in command of his body.

My parents have always been very strong people, and I'd grown used to looking to them for comfort. So I wasn't ready when Mama asked, "Do you think he'll be all right?"

I felt my throat get tight. This time, Mama was asking *me* for reassurance, and I struggled for words that would make her feel better. Finding none, I just put my arm around her shoulder and hugged her.

Within a few days, we received another blow: Jacob's doctors found that his cancer cells had a mutation called the Philadelphia Chromosome, which meant the disease would be unusually resistant to chemotherapy and radiation. His best shot, they said, was a bone-marrow transplant. And even that would carry major risks; the

procedure can trigger a war between the donor's marrow and the patient's body. And sometimes transplants work initially, only to fail later. But we had to take the chance; without a transplant, the doctors said, Jacob would die in six months. The clock was ticking.

JUST AFTER THE DIAGNOSIS, JACOB HAD surgery to insert a catheter in his chest. When we came to visit, doctors and nurses were running in and out of his room—he was coughing violently, and we

