



Sara Immel, a two-time survivor of meningitis, sits outside her home near Eden.
Photo by Doug Raffik/Action Reporter Media

Winning the medical lottery—

Eden resident rebounds from meningitis, twice

BY MONICA M. WALK For Action Reporter Media

Sara Immel is a medical anomaly. She is a two-time survivor of meningitis — a disease that is rare, but often deadly.

"The odds of getting it twice are the odds of a lottery," said her mother, Mary Immel, who was pivotal in getting crucial medical care for her daughter both times. "Doctors call her their Miracle Girl."

While meningitis can be deadly, it is a disease seldom contracted in the general population. Meningitis is the inflammation of the protective membranes of the spine and brain. The bacterial form of meningitis is faster-moving and more frequently fatal than the viral form. Repercussions can include brain damage, limb amputations, kidney disease and hearing loss, or death. Immel had bacterial meningitis both times, at ages 9 and 25.

As she came through the treatment of her August 2014 illness, doctors discovered a hole in a bone that was allowing spinal fluid to leak and become infected. Bone was deteriorating, like dripping water wears away a rock. This likely was the point of infection for both illnesses, and for a lifetime of earaches. "I always had an earache, that was my norm," Sara Immel said. "She never complained," her mother said, adding that the scar tissue in Sara's ear was testament to numerous infections.

Surgery to plug the hole and remove damaged bones and the right eardrum was scheduled for Oct. 8. Immel will lose the hearing in her right ear. But she notes her spinal fluid will be regulated and no longer will drip down her throat or out her nose, and her chronic headaches will end. An implant will send sound signals to her left ear, which remains healthy. Considering that some survivors lose arms and legs from blood pooling in tissues, she feels fortunate.

And, for a second time, she avoided brain damage.

The first round of serious illness happened during a Texas camping vacation Mary Immel took with her three children, Sara, Sara's twin Sam, and oldest son Jay Bob. Sara developed a headache, earache, vomiting and high temperature. A local walk-in clinic was sending the family back to their camper with a prescription for Sara, when a nurse followed Mary Immel to the parking lot and urged them not to leave.

"She told me my daughter was too lethargic, and she wanted the doctor she regularly worked with to see Sara," recalled Mary Immel, who was carrying her sick child. "That doctor came in and asked Sara to touch her chin to her chest and she couldn't do it. A test showed spinal meningitis and she was going down fast. So we went from driving for help to flying Flight for Life."

Husband and father Gary Immel was called to get on a plane from Wisconsin, and Mary pulled the family camper through the city of Ft. Worth to the children's hospital. Sara was in the ICU. A minister was called. "They didn't expect her to live," says Mary. Sara says she can only remember needles and IVs. She was in a coma for two days.

As the family sat at her bedside, they turned the TV on for Sara's then-favorite program, Full House. "She woke up to watch it," Mary said. Sara remained in the hospital for 11 days, and the family stayed in a local Ronald McDonald House.

The symptoms were eerily familiar when Sara became sick in August.

"I had just been in a wedding on Aug. 2," Sara Immel said. "It was one of the best days of my life. Then, I went to the Eden parade. I would have thought spinal meningitis was

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the least of my concerns. How quickly it happened."

On Aug. 3, she felt ill.

"I went to [Agnesian] Convenient Care with an earache, I thought I had an ear infection," Sara said. She went to Convenient Care a second time, as the pain increased. She doesn't recall the next two trips to the St. Agnes ER. Armed with antibiotics and pain medication, Sara spent the night at her parent's Eden home.

"I woke up at 3:30 a.m. and found her unconscious on the couch," Mary said. "I couldn't wake her up. I know I can make it to the hospital in 12 minutes for work, so I carried her to the car and drove to St. Agnes. They brought a gurney bed to the parking lot and we loaded her on it to the ER. It was five hours after her last visit. I told everyone she had spinal meningitis before."

Blood work showed Sara's blood count was off, and a spinal tap was performed. "I knew then," Mary said. "Pus came out of the spinal tap."

The morning in the ICU was a blur for all of the Immels. Sara remained uncon-

scious, strapped to a bed with IVs. A scan showed mounting pressure in Sara's brain, and Neurologist Eugenia-Daniela Hord, directed a transfer to the neurology ICU at Froedert Hospital in Milwaukee. Sara's eardrum was lanced before the flight, and pus drained out. She was intubated for breathing.

"It was a quiet drive 62 miles to Froedert," Mary said. Sara's fiancé Lance Schumacher joined her parents in the car. "We weren't sure she'd be alive when we got there."

Doctors performed surgery to clean infection out of Sara's mastoid. The estimated 45-minute procedure took three hours due to the complications of her infection. Sara was put into an induced three-day coma.

When she opened her eyes on Thursday and was told she was in the hospital with meningitis, Sara said, "I've had that before." That was her first memory since the illness struck on Sunday.

The severity of the infection led the medical team to expect brain damage. When Sara awakened, Mary was brought in to the room and asked, "Sara, do you know who I

SARA IMMEL

AGE: 25

YEARS IN THE COMMUNITY:
Lifelong resident of Eden

OCCUPATION:
Nanny and server

REACTION TO
NOMINATION TO SUCCESS:
Excited. But, it made me realize
how sick I actually was.

TO WHAT DO YOU OWE YOUR
MEASURE OF SUCCESS?
Prayer.

am?" Sara responded with an eye roll, the universal response of daughters irritated with mothers. It was a positive answer.

Still on a breathing tube, Sara soon motioned for her phone and indicated she was worried her employer didn't know she would be missing work. "People around the

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