

Balling for Bacino

Sophomore to receive kidney transplant, battles cancer

STORY & PHOTO JACOB FONTAINE

He walks down the hallway and presses the red entrance button to the dialysis wing.

"Come on in, Nicky," the clerk says.

The hospital smell fills his nose as his nurse leads him to his seat. He props up his iPad in front of him to get through the three and a half hour process.

Sick children surround him in all directions, but he couldn't look that sick. After getting his weight and height recorded for the third time this week, he sinks into his chair to endure another boring, motionless treatment. Staring out the window across the room, he wonders what he's missing at school. His catheter was sore and his muscles ached as he tried to watch another rerun of *How I Met Your Mother* on the iPad.

He couldn't stretch. He couldn't get up to get fresh air. He was trapped in the prison that was his hospital seat for nine hours a week.

"Just think about how great it will be after you get your transplant," the nurse said as she smiled at him. "Only one more year."

And sophomore Nick Bacino can't wait. No more dialysis. No more dieting and feeling sick daily. He will be able to finally go on vacation, too. A new kidney will solve all his problems.

He knows because at 16 this isn't his first transplant.

Nick's mom, Meg Bacino, also sits in the room, providing support as he goes through dialysis. Spending time with her son in the hospitals has become a big part of her life since she first discovered his kidney was failing 10 years ago.

She recalls Nick being a happy, smiling toddler. It wasn't until he was 5 that her son began to feel pain he described as his chest hurting. She called the doctor, and they told her to take him to the emergency room. After watching him go through multiple blood tests, she anxiously waited for the results. The solemn look on the nurse's face told the news. Nick was anemic, meaning he had a dangerously low number of red blood cells. After looking closely at his blood cell counts, they also found that his kidneys were failing.

After being transferred to Children's Hospital in Dallas, further

tests confirmed what they already knew. As soon as Meg and her husband Russ Bacino knew their son needed a transplant, they both opted for blood tests. The tests revealed they were both suitable donors, and Meg immediately agreed to transplant.

"After I knew I could donate it was a no-brainer," Meg said. "There wasn't even a second thought."

The operation was successful and Nick was once again a happy kid.

"He began to smile and laugh again," Meg said. "As a mother I can say it was one of the best things I've done in my life."

Following the transplant, Nick and his family went to a pizza restaurant, and he ordered his favorite, cheese. After seeing the parmesan at the table, he unscrewed it and poured a mound of it on his slice. Until he got the transplant, he hadn't been able to eat cheese. Though at the time he didn't understand the sacrifice his mom had

made for him, she remembered his smile, showing a world of appreciation.

With his new kidney, Nick made the most of his elementary and middle school years. Playing basketball on the school team in both seventh and eighth grade was one of the things he was most thankful for.

"Basketball was pretty much everything I had," Nick said. "I really enjoyed playing because it was the only sport I could play with my friends."

Eighth grade was Nick's favorite year. The basketball team at Downing Middle School made it to the district championship, with Nick as a starter the entire season. He felt healthy most of the time while playing. However, in the back of his head he knew he knew his mom's kidney would only last so long. As high school approached, his health gradually deteriorated and he became in need of another transplant.

His brother was the next to volunteer. Tanner Baccino, 21, is a senior attending Tarleton State University in Stephenville.



Sophomore Nick Bacino receives his dialysis treatment at the Children's Medical Hospital of Dallas. He has received a kidney transplant from his mom and will also from his brother.

Nick was in elementary school when he and Tanner played basketball in the driveway during a warm summer. After shooting a few shots and roughhousing, Tanner patted his brother on the head and walked him inside. As they cooled off, they made plans to walk to the pond and fish for the rest of the day.

"It was the same old younger brother, older brother relationship," Tanner said. "He was a little sickly from the kidneys, but when he wasn't, we'd have fun."

During his freshman year in college, Tanner donated blood order to find out his blood type. Just like his parents, his results confirmed he could donate a kidney. From that point on he started joking around with the family that if Nick needed a kidney, he'd be the man.

It remained a joke for a few years, but during his junior year in college, he got the call. Though he was uneasy about having to undergo his first surgery, there was no hesitance in his decision.

"I'd gladly give up what I have now to give Nick a few more years," Tanner said. "He deserves to live life. He's still so young."

After Tanner agreed, Nick's family began the preparations for the second transplant. Beginning in June of Nick's eighth grade year, he completed the numerous required tests and procedures. After the transplant, Nick would be able to focus on basketball again and make the freshman team. Things once again looked promising for him.

In December of that year Nick found himself in another hospital room. Staring in the doctor's gray eyes, he felt a great sadness. What he had thought was a screening for lymphoma was actually a test to see if it had spread. Not only was he suddenly a cancer

patient, now he couldn't receive the second transplant.

That wasn't even the worse part. This meant another year of dialysis and that he could never play basketball for the school again. But not even cancer could phase him. Nick's primary kidney doctor has over 1,000 patients and had he not taken a further look into Nick's case than usual, they wouldn't have caught the cancer.

"Though it was bad at first, cancer was just another thing to take medicine for," Nick said. "I'm just thankful they caught it."

Despite his situation, Nick stays optimistic looking towards the future. He can't wait to vacation again, play basketball with his friends and eat whatever he wants. He also takes great comfort in knowing that no matter how long the transplant will take, his brother will be waiting and his family will be supporting him until then. He recalls his family all spending two Mother's Days and a Christmas in a hospital room to be there for him.

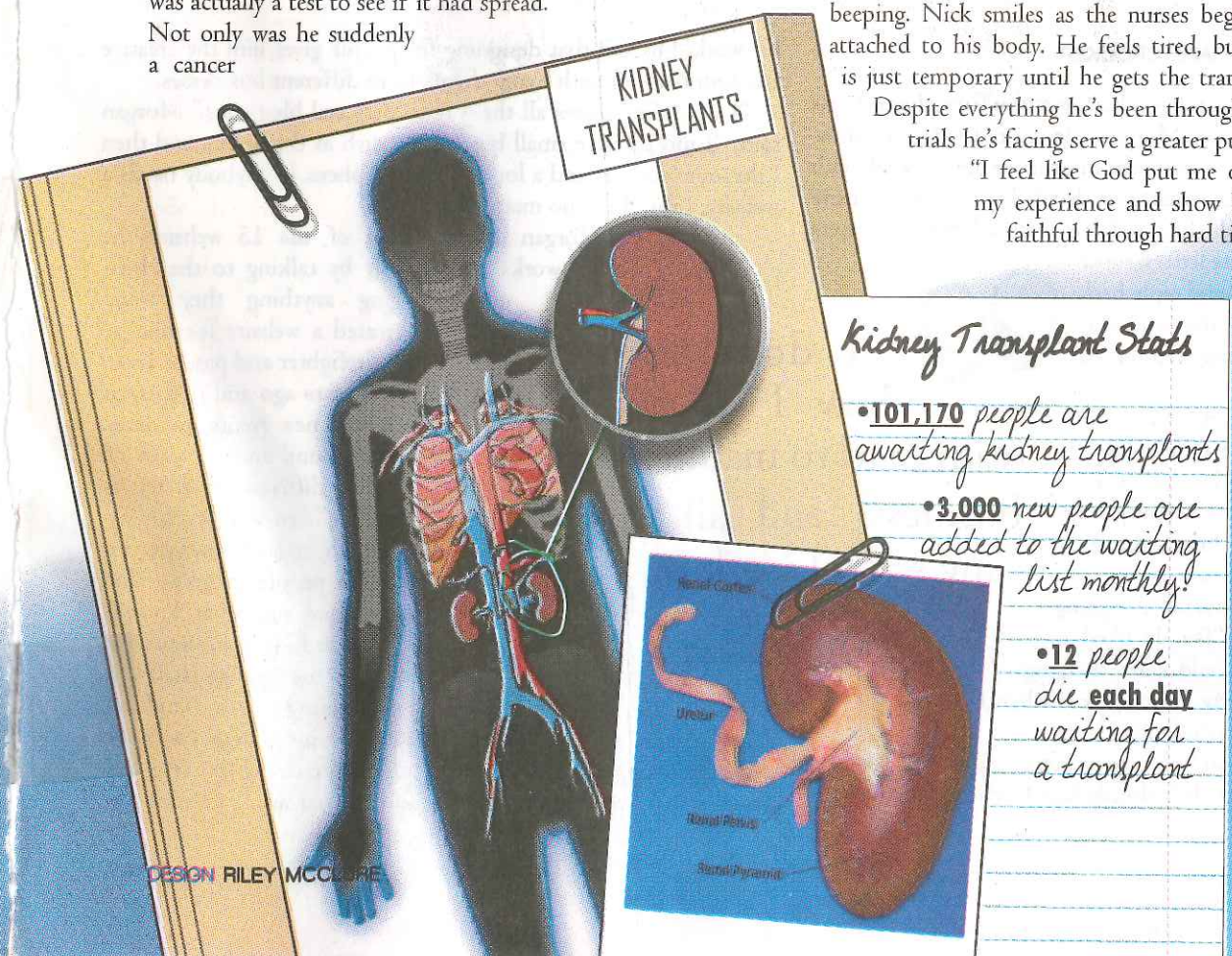
"There's no reason to get sad when you have stuff to look forward to in your life, especially when your family is giving up parts of their life to give me more life," Nick said.

In February a fundraiser to aid Nick's medical costs was held by the community at Buffalo Wild Wings. He watched as his friends, as well as people he had never met, filled the seats, all wearing "Balling for Bacino" shirts.

Sitting at the head of the table, a wave of happiness over comes him as he smiles at the friends and family that had taken care of him since he was young. Though he wasn't sure what tomorrow would bring, he still felt blessed that God had given him enough time to experience this moment.

As he nears the end of his dialysis treatment, the machine starts beeping. Nick smiles as the nurses begin to remove the tubes attached to his body. He feels tired, but he knows this process is just temporary until he gets the transplant from his brother. Despite everything he's been through, he realizes that all the trials he's facing serve a greater purpose.

"I feel like God put me on earth to show people my experience and show how we still should stay faithful through hard times," Nick said.



DESIGN RILEY MCCLURE

MHSMARQUEE.COM

DESIGN RILEY MCCLURE