



HILARY SCHWAB

Lean on Me

Despite their differences, two young men
forge a touching friendship

By Kathleen Wheaton

More than a year ago, Dwayne Whitely was preparing his supper in the communal kitchen of the Children's Inn at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda when he noticed a young man about his age trying to figure out how to use a pay phone. Whitely, 20, had come to Bethesda from his native Jamaica to be treated for severe aplastic anemia (SAA), a disease that causes bone marrow to stop producing new blood cells.

Watching Suraj Lama, 19, of Nepal, trying to call home was, Whitely says, "like a new guy coming onto a new ball field. If you're going to play cricket, you have to know what to do with the ball." He showed Lama, who spoke almost no English, how the phone worked. It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Lama also came to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) to be treated for SSA. A uni-

versity student who planned to study management, Lama grew up on the outskirts of Katmandu, where his father, Ambar, worked as a painter of *thangkas*, the intricate and colorful depictions of the Buddha that are central to Nepalese Buddhist observance.

Toward the end of high school, Lama, who played soccer, cricket and volleyball, began collapsing from fatigue, running high fevers and seeing double. At a private hospital in

Katmandu, he was diagnosed with SAA and told that the only treatment available locally was multiple blood transfusions—which, over time, stop working. An Internet-savvy cousin learned about NHLBI’s clinical trials for aplastic anemia and set up an appointment. In May of 2007, Suraj and Ambar boarded a plane for Dulles International Airport. Neither had flown before.

Whitely grew up in the farming village of St. Ann on a stretch of Jamaica’s northern coastline. The third of nine children, he began working in construction at age 12 to pay for his schooling. He also had a magic touch for raising the goats, cabbages, plantains and sweet potatoes that fed his family. “And in Jamaica, we also plant marijuana,” he adds with a grin. “It’s a tourist area.”

A little more than a year ago, Whitely began to experience symptoms similar to Lama’s, along with terrifying hemorrhages. At a public hospital in Kingston, Jamaica, “the doctor says I’m dying of this [SAA].” Fortunately, the doctor was aware of the NHLBI’s program and helped Whitely get to Bethesda. “It’s a blessing,” Whitely says, suggesting that the silver lining to having a life-threatening disease is having one that’s rare enough to interest researchers.

The incidence of aplastic anemia in the U.S. is about 2 per million persons, according to NHLBI clinician Philip Scheinberg. SAA gained national attention in the 1970s, when the cases of youngsters Ted DeVita and David Vetter inspired the movie *The Boy in the Plastic Bubble*, starring John Travolta. The disease is “idiopathic, which simply means we don’t know why or how some people get it,” Scheinberg says. Since the 1990s, a combination of immunosuppressive drugs (ATG and

cyclosporine) has proved effective for about two-thirds of aplastic anemia patients, according to Scheinberg. But

“Back in Jamaica, my father said to me, ‘When you are in Rome, do what the Romans do.’”

Whitely and Lama were among the less lucky one-third who did not respond to the drugs. Early this spring, Whitely’s 21-year-old sister and Lama’s 14-year-old brother arrived in the U.S. to donate bone marrow for their respective siblings.

During an arduous year of waiting, treatments and more waiting, Whitely and Lama bonded over video games, Chuck Norris movies, shooting pool and trips to Montgomery Mall (extreme isolation is no longer considered effective for SAA patients). They tried to convert each other to the merits of reggae artist Bob Marley and Bollywood, the Mumbai-based, Hindi-language film industry in India. They took charge of NIH’s vegetable garden—though Whitely was told that marijuana was not among the permitted herbs.

“Back in Jamaica, my father said to me, ‘When you are in Rome, do what the Romans do,’” Whitely says, and he and Lama both laugh.

If they weren’t sitting in the lobby of the Children’s Inn, they might be any two lively and bemused foreign exchange students talking about how, in America, cars are big and bus fares are expensive, that paper must not be thrown into the street, that music must be played quietly, that the cute mothers of younger patients may not be asked out.

But it’s a foreign exchange program of indefinite duration and unknown outcome. In February, both young men underwent bone marrow transplants. If their red blood cell counts improve, they will be able to go home and resume their lives, returning to NIH for checkups at longer and longer intervals. A cure is basically a continued remission. “If the disease does come back, it’s usually within a five-year period,” Scheinberg says.

Living with such frightening uncertainty is much easier if your new best friend knows exactly what it’s like. Children’s Inn Chaplain Amy Lewis recalls that soon after Lama arrived in Bethesda, Whitely brought him to meet her. “You could see a spark in both their eyes, as if they’d already been friends a long, long time,” Lewis says. “Suraj didn’t really speak English, but he understood Dwayne quite well.”

“It’s a blessing, yeah,” Whitely says of the friendship. Before their transplants, he accompanied Lama and his father to a Buddhist temple in Silver Spring “just to see what it was like,” he says. When Lama is told that his English now has an unmistakable Caribbean lilt, he glances at Whitely and both shrug.

In each other’s company, everything they’re going through goes without saying. They’re just two guys hanging out, sharing music, watching dumb movies, laughing uproariously at jokes adults don’t get. And they lean on each other as needed; when Whitely lost his eyesight for a few weeks, Lama punched the numbers so his friend could call home. **B**

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