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## **NO TIME TO LOSE; WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LIVE LIFE TO THE FULLEST? CANCER AT AGE 17 FORCES **ZACH RAMSEY** TO FIND THE ANSWER - FAST**

**BYLINE: KEN **GARFIELD**, RELIGION EDITOR**

During one of their regular conversations over tacos at Monterrey Mexican Restaurant in Pineville, Nathan Scholl asked **Zach Ramsey** what he'd want if he could have anything in life.

Zach thought a moment, then told his youth pastor he'd like to be normal. He'd like to be able to go to school, pull his regular shift at Chick-fil-A, hang out with friends, play poker, go to Taco Bell for lunch, go to the movies on a Friday night at Phillips Place - all without having to struggle with the deepest questions.

Instead of having to ask himself, "Why did God let this happen to me?", Zach ought to be asking one of his buddies, "You think so-and-so will go out with me?"

Instead of having to make his dreams come true here and now and fast, he ought to have a lifetime to see where his yearnings take him.

But Zach has cancer.

No one knows how long any of us has, including a 17-year-old who hopes to find out after Thanksgiving whether the radiation is doing the job.

Whatever the news, though, he has already learned a lesson a lot of people go to their graves never having understood.

Mary Louise **Ramsey, Zach's** mother, says it was as if they were zapped from one world to another.

A few days before Christmas 2002, Zach woke up in their home in the SouthPark area with a terrible pain below his stomach. He made it to Myers Park High that morning, but he had to call his mom to pick him up. Within 75 hours, a trip to the pediatrician, tissue samples and then a call from the doctor changed everything.

Cancer in the soft tissue around the prostate.

"It seems like a long time ago, doesn't it, Zach?" his mom said.

"A long time ago," he answered.

"The life that we knew and the family that we were ceased that moment," she said. "We became an entirely different family."

Zach, his parents and his younger brother and sister hoped and prayed and believed that the 42 weeks of chemo and radiation had won out. Zach's cancer, in fact, was declared to be in remission in November 2003. But it was detected again during spring break in April - lesions on his lungs that led to chemo and radiation all over again. They hope to find out where he stands at his next doctor's appointment.

Over a burger and fries at Harper's, Zach said he's down to 119 pounds, 21 pounds less than he weighed before the cancer came back. "Skin and bones," he said.

He's not able to go to school, working instead on some courses from home when he feels up to it. Some of his hair is gone. His eyes hint of a teenager whose condition makes it hard to live like a teenager. At one

point during this long illness and treatment, he told his parents that he felt as if he were crying inside all the time.

But his eyes also hint of a young man with a fierce will.

"I know I'm not going to die from this," Zach said. "I'm 100 percent. I just have a comfort that I'm gonna beat this. I'm determined to beat it. I don't want to sound arrogant, but with God's power, I can handle anything.

"If I was thinking about dying all the time, it would depress me, bog me down."

Somewhere along the road to discovering just how strong he really is, Zach figured out something else about himself, and about whatever time he has left.

"I don't want to have any regrets "

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A cross and 'Reborn'

For Zach and his family, no regrets has meant turning life into a series of joyful dashes in a race of an uncertain distance.

Consider Zach's new tattoo the starting gun to that race - an elaborate cross with the word "Reborn" written across it.

"They told me the rib cage was the most painful spot they could do it," Zach said with a smile, not even trying to hide the fact that he's bragging.

Why there then?

"Because it's closer to my heart. I really have been reborn to a new person. I've changed so much. Nothing's more important than God, friends and family."

With his dad taking pictures in the tattoo parlor on Monroe Road, Zach got his tattoo last May - then was absolutely floored when his 15-year-old brother, Alex, and one of his best friends, Andrew Snow, went out and got their own tattoos in his honor.

Their tattoos feature a cross and the letters "ZJR," in honor of **Zach James Ramsey** - the skinny kid whose adventures were just beginning.

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Blackjack and memories

It's simple, Jim Ramsey said.

"We said, OK, we're going to have some fun and do some things we want to do and create some time for our family and friends and hopefully say after a year, 'Wow, that was a fun year.'

"To me," he said, "every day is heightened."

So over the Labor Day weekend, Zach, his dad and two family friends flew to Las Vegas, a city that has always fascinated Zach.

They stayed at the Venetian Resort Hotel & Casino, saw the musical "Mamma Mia!" and ate so much filet mignon at Delmonico Steakhouse that Zach was too stuffed for dessert. He likes his steak well done.

Then there was the several thousand dollars Zach won playing blackjack, the exact amount he's too modest to share with anyone but his closest pals.

Let's just say he had an ID indicating he was over 21. His strategy at the tables was to hit on 16 and go with a feeling on 17. Jim Ramsey said his boss told the family that if God has a sense of humor, He'd let Zach come home with a bucket full of money.

They all came home laughing.

There Zach is in Vegas, swigging free bottled water and Cokes, winning hand after hand, hitting 21 and raking in big bucks on one hand, piling up memory after memory in a city a million miles from home.

"Like another world," he said.

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Sharks and a shining sun

Last month, Zach and his family took four of his friends to Paradise Island in the Bahamas. His siblings, Alex and Pauline, 13, also took friends. His grandparents and aunt went, too. All together, their party totaled 16.

Over four nights and five days, the guys checked out the roulette tables, hung out on the beach, swam with the dolphins, snorkeled with the sharks and came out of the crystal-clear water not believing what they had just seen.

"Nine-foot reef sharks," Zach said.

The sun shone like a diamond every day, Zach said, as he and Myers Park High friends Walt Fisher, Trey Laughrun, Andrew Snow and Mark Tcherkejian got the chance to forget there ever was such a thing in a teenager's life as calculus or cancer.

"That group," Zach said, "is my best friends. The ones who are there for me all the time."

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The Panthers and friends

It took a year, but Zach finally settled on a gift from the Make-A-Wish Foundation after ruling out an RV trip across America with his buddies. He chose two PSLs to Panthers games.

Football, though, is just a small part of what this gift has become.

In Section 310 above where the Panthers take the field, Zach has found a group of 30-something PSL holders who have embraced him as one of their own.

Mandy Furr, Kevin Raymer, Thomas Wilson, Kelly Yarborough and the rest of their fun-seeking crew have invited Zach and his guest to tailgate parties. They've gone to a Make-A-Wish auction and surprised him with a No. 89 Panthers jersey signed by wide receiver Steve Smith. They check the Ramseys' church Web site, Carmel Presbyterian, which shares a regular update on Zach's condition and his adventures.

When he got off the plane from Vegas, Zach called Raymer to tell him about his blackjack winnings. When he and his friend, Myers Park High junior Nancy Ratcliffe, got to the game against San Diego, the first thing Zach shared was his swim with the sharks in the Bahamas - and the fact that he and his pals weren't even in a cage.

"I don't believe it!" Wilson responded, looking pleased that their young friends had arrived for a Sunday afternoon of high fives, football and friendship.

Wilson, 33, who works in the construction business, said Zach got lucky - he landed seats near "a bunch of rowdy guys," who are grateful for their new friend.

"He's part of this," said Kelly Yarborough, 30, a nurse. "He's affected all of us."

Raymer, 35, a real estate agent, lost a grandfather to cancer. This, he said, is different.

"He lived a full life," Raymer said. "Zach hasn't lived a full life."

"I worry that he won't be here next year."

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Faith, wisdom and more to do

His journey has taken Zach well beyond Las Vegas, Paradise Island, Panthers games with his new pals and a tattoo parlor.

He's not one of these teenagers who wears his faith on his sleeve or speaks with absolute certainty about the better place he knows awaits. But with his parents, and during lunches over Mexican food with youth pastor Nathan Scholl, he has begun showing a deeper side, a wisdom born of cancer and Christianity. Zach orders the Speedy Gonzalez - two tacos and an enchilada - and then gets serious.

He's asking more questions, said Scholl. Rather than being angry at God, he's disappointed at not being well. At 17, he has figured out what's important, and he doesn't mind telling whomever will listen.

"He sees through the circus of our lives," Scholl said. "He can see people's motives because he's suffered so much. He's able to view life with an eternal perspective."

He also seems to understand that through his suffering, and how he has handled it with such grace and good cheer, he's able to make a difference in how people see their own lives.

"I told him, 'Your life will impact more lives than mine ever will,' " said Scholl, who left Carmel Presbyterian Church to study at Reformed Theological Seminary. "I think that's started to sink in."

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'Blumies' and more

There have been other dimensions to **Zach's** story.

Jim **Ramsey**, who works in sales with International Paper, has moved his office to their home so the family can spend more time together.

Zach's sister, Pauline, has begun making "Blumies" - little creatures made from pouring flour into balloons. The critters are named for Presbyterian Hospital's Blume pediatric cancer clinic, and are meant to comfort children going through what her brother has gone through. Proceeds from the Blumies already sold will go to the **Zach Ramsey** Children's Cancer Fund to help families with cancer-related expenses through Make-A-Wish and the Blume clinic.

Each Blumie comes with a bonus:

A photo of a young man who is sure God will provide a cure - and who is also positive there must be something else worth doing before that day comes.

"I was talking to my mom," Zach said. "The next trip I want to go on is Egypt."