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Photo left: Molly and her husband P.J. at a waterfall in Kerry, Ireland, where they traveled in 2006. This was Molly's fourth trip to Ireland and she hopes to go back this summer. Photo above: Molly at her desk in her home office.

# My Journey with Scleroderma

“One’s destination is never a place, but a new way of seeing things.” – Henry Miller

**T**hroughout her childhood, Molly Foley, now 35, traveled with her parents and older brother, Mike, all around the country. She enjoyed the thrill of “stepping out of [her] comfort zone,” and “experiencing the unfamiliar.” Touring states like Vermont, Colorado, Florida, and California, Molly’s family excursions were always filled with new and unexpected adventures. Yet none of these childhood travels could prepare her for the journey that would present itself just after her 33rd birthday, when Molly was diagnosed with scleroderma. For the first time, Molly felt her future was suddenly put on hold. It was perhaps thanks to the support of family members and friends that Molly began to realize scleroderma would be the most elaborate journey yet—one that would test her courage, patience, and will. Two years after her diagnosis and a stem cell transplant, Molly has just begun to understand the collection of events that have

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brought her to the present day, and how she intends to move forward with her life and career.

## An Unexpected Encounter

In early 2007, Molly began to notice painful sensations in her hands. As a marketing consultant spending multiple hours on the computer every day, Molly thought she had carpal tunnel syndrome. Soon after noticing these symptoms, Molly went to her doctor and he confirmed her suspicions. Yet despite her diagnosis and treatment, Molly's symptoms did not improve. Molly soon suffered pain in her knees, elbows, and wrists along with stiffness in her muscles. "I didn't know what was happening to me," notes Molly, "I thought perhaps I had rheumatoid arthritis."

Molly's doctor referred her to a rheumatologist for further screening. "Just by looking at me, he knew what I had." After an echocardiogram and lung tests, Molly's diagnosis of systemic scleroderma was confirmed. "I was told that this was an autoimmune disease, and that there was no cure available." Despite the news, Molly did not accept the defeatist prognosis given to her.

## A Change in Plans

"Immediately, I wanted to know what I could do to battle the disease, now that I had an accurate diagnosis." Molly and her husband P.J. began their own research to look for treatment centers and possible therapies. "We came across two scleroderma centers, one in Des Moines and another in Chicago. After evaluating both, we decided Chicago was the best fit for me."

During this time, Molly and P.J. found a great deal of comfort and support from their family, friends, and church community. "So many people would pray for my husband and me, as we searched for possible treatments to manage my scleroderma." It was perhaps this collaborative rally against the disease that gave Molly the hope and inspiration she needed to move forward with the clinical trial in Chicago.

## Rendezvous in Chicago

In January of 2008, Molly began her clinical trial for a chemotherapy procedure at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago. Although early tests indicated progress, by December of that same year, Molly's symptoms had worsened. Despite this, Molly was recommended for a second clinical trial for chemotherapy and a stem cell transplant.

"This felt like my second chance at beating this

disease," says Molly, who never lost hope that she could overcome the disease. Molly began her second trial in February, 2009, and started her first round of testing, which took approximately one month. One week later—after she received confirmation that she had been cleared for a transplant—Molly began her second clinical trial. After five days, she began the stem cell transplant procedure, in which stem cells were collected and separated. On April 8, she was given back her healthy stem cells. "I lost my hair from the chemotherapy, my body's immune system was weak, but I felt such strength of spirit because I knew today, I might be getting my life back."

The following days and weeks of recovery proved favorable for Molly, who did not incur any infection or fever post-treatment. "Thanks to the antibiotics and a great team of doctors and nurses, I didn't fall ill during this crucial period where my body had to rebuild its immunity. I was exhausted and weak, but never sick." By the end of April, Molly was heading home to the Quad Cities. "Although I had to remain at home for months so I wouldn't risk infection, I was still so happy to be going home." Molly was welcomed by her beloved dog, Smitty, whom she had not seen since her departure for Chicago.

## The Road Ahead

Since her successful transplant, Molly continues to attend physical therapy sessions to increase her mobility and is careful to exercise every day. "My husband and I love to golf. Because of scleroderma I wasn't able to play, but now after the transplant, I'm able to play 11 holes—that's a true victory for me." Molly's pulmonary function tests have improved so much, that she is able to walk Smitty once again.

Molly also went back to work part-time in May 2009, and now is working full-time again. "I'm fortunate that my job allows me to work mostly from home, which has been conducive to my limited mobility and energy."

Molly looks forward to her next days of travel in 2010, where she hopes to take a trip with P.J. to Europe to see the Tour-de-France. "I've always wanted to go, and after everything that's happened, I feel there's no better time than the present." Indeed, Molly knows that every journey she's had has helped to prepare her for the ones ahead. "I do believe that my experience with scleroderma has helped me grow as a person. I've learned how strong I am, and how positive I can be." As Molly has come to understand, it is sometimes the roads we travel that make us who we are, and teach us about the persons that we are to become. □