

## Chapter 13

# *The Key to Heaven*

*"God pours life into death and death into life without a drop being spilled."* —Author Unknown

Upon arriving in Miami, I was in a time crunch. I had less than an hour and a half to get our luggage, store it in a locker, and catch the bus to the section of town where Dr. Mencia's office was located. This was my first time in Miami and I had no idea where we were. I finally found a map and, with the help of an airport worker, was pointed in the direction of the correct bus stop.

The bus was loaded with people. Amber wouldn't wear her hat and no matter what I said, the answer was always the same: "No." I wanted to sit in the last row so that no one could sit behind us... no one could stare. I checked it out. "Full." Three rows from the back, two seats were empty. We headed for them. As we sat down, I could hear the teenagers behind us whispering. "I hope Amber doesn't hear them." I made small talk with her, hoping to drown them out. It was a very long ride. At times, I felt compelled to explain, but I didn't want to put Amber through it; she'd been through so much already. Some people had no regard for her; they would say anything at all with no thought to the fact that *she was there, she was listening, and SHE was the one with the huge tumor that was eating her alive!*

Two buses and a transfer later, we were dropped at a corner. According to the map, it was a long way from Dr. Mencia's office. We had to walk the rest of the way and we didn't have much time before our scheduled appointment. With the midday sun beating down on us, we picked up our pace. Amber was tired and hungry and started to cry. "Mommy, I can't walk anymore." "That's O.K.,

Amber. I'll carry you." I gave her a drink of the juice I'd brought, then I scooped her up. We had quite a distance to go, so I shaded her from the sun with my hat, and kept on walking. Almost instantly, she fell asleep. Oh, how I longed to give her a good life, free from the pain, struggle, and cancer. I raced down the street as if *that* life was waiting for us, not the one ahead.

Again, I was drifting above our lives, looking down. It was like watching a movie. I saw myself walking, nearly running down the road in the hot sun. I checked my watch. "Twenty minutes to go. God, I hope I make it." There was a backpack on my back, a large bag on one shoulder, Amber's head on the other, moving in time with each step. "I'm hot... tired... thirsty... I want to rest. I want to remove my heavy load; not only Amber, but the weight of the world as well. I want to give up. Damn! I don't want to be doing this! *What is driving me on???*" With all of my heart, I wanted to stop. But my legs kept moving. They were sore but I couldn't feel them. "I am here. I am moving you forward. Think your own thoughts; feel your own feelings. I will help you choose... speak for you... move you in the right direction." I heard Him, but I didn't see Him, and I *still* felt all alone on the streets of Miami. Nothing changed—not the hot sun, the weight of my daughter, or the fact that my legs were beginning to ache. In a moment, we were on Kendall Ave. and walking up to Dr. Mencia's office.

I stepped from the desert and into a cool oasis. It smelled like a doctor's office. "Typical," I thought. Amber woke up. I gave her a drink of water, fed her a snack, and waited. Thirty minutes later, we saw the doctor. I reviewed her history as briefly as I could. He studied the tumor without regard for the person it was attached to: Amber. He read Clement's letter, then turned to me. "Do you intend to stay around here? I don't want to just be a technician. I won't just do the surgery and that's it. I want to take care of the whole child... take her to an oncologist and see what *he* thinks would be best for her." "But I don't *want* to give her chemotherapy... no sense putting poisons in her body." "You're not a doctor." "No, but I'm educated." "You're not 'up' on the latest treatments for cancer." "Yes, I *am*." Clearly the conversation was going nowhere and *fast*. He wasn't accustomed to his patients

asking questions or challenging his advice. "Why won't you just de-bulk it, that's *all*?" He flatly refused to answer my question and "politely" finished our visit.

I left his office feeling spunky and indignant. "At least I held on to my principles." Another side of me responded. "So what? What good did it do you or Amber?" I stuffed "Patti A and B" deep into my soul for the time being. I didn't have time to dwell on myself; I was back in the 'States to *save Amber's life*, not take a stand. On to the next hope, the next appointment.

Jackson Memorial Hospital was enormous. I hadn't been in such a large medical facility since Montreal and before that, Yale-New Haven. It was overpowering. Dr. Fix could see that we felt a little intimidated. He did his best to put us at ease and bolster our spirits. "I agree. She does need surgery. Since I'm a radiologist, not a surgeon, I'll have to consult with one on staff. I'm willing to work *with* you, though. Whatever therapy you choose, I will respect your decision." I was pleasantly surprised, even encouraged, at his willingness to cooperate and consider my point of view. I walked to the receptionist with a bounce in my step.

"Excuse me, can you tell me how to get to Miami International Airport? Where can I catch the nearest bus?" She looked at Amber who was, by now, exhausted and frail. "Are you *sure* you want to take a *bus* there?" As we were talking, a man came up. "Excuse me, I overheard you talking. I'm waiting for my wife to finish radiation treatments, but if you can wait, I'll be glad to take you to the airport." To say I was grateful, would be an understatement. What I felt was beyond gratitude; I felt the grace of God and saw Him in this man. "Thank you," I muttered, "I *really* appreciate that." We got to the airport with time to spare and sat down to eat dinner and watch the planes taking off and landing, one of our favorite pastimes.

### September 29, 9:50 pm

*I went to Yale today to see Dr. Touloukian. I felt as though I had received the education of a lifetime in the six months since we last met. I know he did his best with Amber; he was the only one at Yale who believed me. He*

*will not do the surgery, but gave me the name of a surgeon he trusts: Bernie Siegel. He spoke very highly of him.*

*He also opened my eyes about cancer and what to expect: The sights AND the smells. He tried to be gentle, I know, but how do you gently chop off someone's arm with a butter knife??? He doesn't see much hope for her survival. Quite frankly, neither do I. But as feeble as my hope is, I must keep trying. I am not ready to let her go. I am not ready to let her die.*

I made an appointment with Dr. Bernie Siegel. Upon entering his office, I knew this man was different; but the skeptic in me said, "Don't even hope." The atmosphere was casual. Magazines about health, including *alternative* health magazines, were lying on the tables. "This feels like someone's living room," I thought in disbelief. His receptionist was warm and friendly. "Bernie will be right with you." "BERNIE? Even *she* called him Bernie. I wonder if he's a *real* doctor." Having "been through the wringer" with doctors for the last year and a half, my expectations were fairly low.

I expected to be waiting forever in the Waiting Room, just like I had countless time before in countless other doctor's offices. Old, *way* outdated magazines would be next to stiff and uncomfortable chairs. The receptionist would be preoccupied with her coworkers (what they did over the weekend, how their kids were, spouses, boyfriends, etc.) and only look up as a second thought or as though I was interrupting. "Can I help you?" in a snotty, rude, why-did-you-interrupt-me tone. Of course, I would have to have all of my paperwork filled out correctly and all the proper documents in hand. Then I would be told to sit and wait... and wait... without any further words or updates or apologies from them. My time meant nothing; I was there to wait.

From there, I'd go into an Examining Room with Amber in tow and wait for the doctor. He/she would walk in, say, "Hello," then set about the business of examining her tumor. After wiggling it, pressing it, and measuring it, a pronouncement would be made. With little or no regard for Amber, the person, they would tell me what they thought was the best solution... the

wisest protocol. Any questions I had would be met with disdain and their self-righteousness would attempt to dominate the conversation. But for a few exceptions (who redeemed their colleagues in my mind), this was my experience with "Medical Establishment" doctors. Definitely *not* with Bernie. He was different, even human.

We were invited into the back and led down a hall to an Examining Room. I was delighted at the difference. The door opened and a good looking gentleman in his forties walked in. "Hmmm... kind eyes... a nice smile... a *bald head*?" "Hi, I'm Bernie Siegel." He shook my hand then looked down at Amber. "*You must be Amber.*" They shook hands and were instantly connected. Without giving me another look, he started talking... and talking... and talking with *Amber!* I was rightfully in second place. Amber was the one; it was her life, not mine, and Bernie knew it. This meeting was hers. He was not in a hurry and I patiently waited until they were finished before I briefed him on Amber's journey. Then he examined her. He touched her so gently and with such care, that she seemed to be one of his own. I was nearly moved to tears but held them back. I had to; I couldn't let anyone see my soul.

From Bernie's lips, a miracle. "I'll do the surgery. I'm willing to take full responsibility for Amber's life while she's on the table. I'll treat her as my own," he assured me. "What about the publicity... the controversy... the pressure from the 'Medical Establishment'?" He smiled. "I don't *have* to be a doctor." Taken aback, I was pleasantly surprised. He said it so casually and without forethought, that I knew he meant it. I was very impressed and so was Amber. She could see that he cared. He seemed to be a human being, just being *human*. He was not a doctor... a robot... a machine. Bernie actually *cared!* His philosophy of life, cancer, and death was so refreshing and unusual, I hardly knew what to think.

"I want to admit her to St. Raphael's Hospital on Monday, run some tests, and bring in a team of specialists to see exactly how far the cancer had spread and whether surgery is even possible." Finally, I could let go, fall into someone's arms—if only figuratively—and let them take charge of our life... of Amber's life.