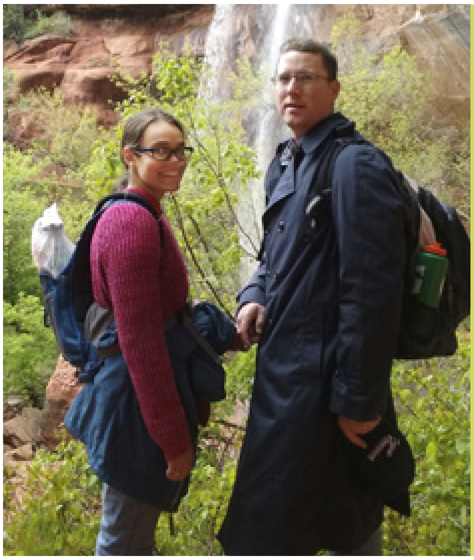
A LOVE

GREATER THAN TERMINAL ILLNESS

By Leah Welker

A few years ago, Nate Richardson found himself in a college science class in which the teacher brought up the subject of cystic fibrosis (CF)—a chronic and progressive disease that affects the body's ability to produce or break down substances like mucus, sweat, or digestive juices. CF can severely affect the quality of life of the patient, and currently there is no cure. The students began a discussion of whether it would be a good idea for people with that disease to have children. Since CF is genetic, there is a possibility that the parent could pass the disease along to the child if the other parent is a carrier, thus affecting the child and ensuring that the disease would remain within the human gene pool.

There were people in the class on both sides of the issue, but Nate remained silent. He was so upset by the question that he would not speak, because he knew someone with CF. In fact, she was his wife, Megan.



Megan and Nate Richardson will tell you that happiness doesn't come from your circumstances—it comes from your faith.

Cystic fibrosis demands a rigorous treatment schedule and frequent appointments with many different specialists—anywhere from three to five in a typical week. Megan has to do respiratory therapy twice a day, which involves putting on a vest that fills with air pockets that essentially pound her until the mucus in her lungs becomes easier to cough up. Because she gets sick easily—and when she gets sick, she generally has to be hospitalized—she wears a mask in most public places. She can't do sports that involve running, and she has to be careful about not overexerting herself. She and Nate love to go hiking together, but depending on how sick she is, she might have to carry along an oxygen tank at the same time.

Note: The bar illustration next to the article title represents chromosome 7, with the cystic fibrosis gene in green.

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Reflecting on the blessings of the temple, Megan says, "It's wonderful to know that families are forever, that we will continue on through the eternities. Whatever children we are able to have will be able to be with us forever. That's a wonderful promise."

Nate and Megan Richardson decided to marry knowing full well that Megan had CF. She was diagnosed at two years old and had spent most of her life dealing with the disease. What's more, Megan and Nate had been good friends since high school. They knew as well as anyone could the struggles that lay ahead of them. "It's probably harder than I thought it would be," Nate says. "But," he adds firmly, "most good things are that way."

Megan says, "I think everyone kind of envisions the fairy-tale ending: you get married and then everything's all perfect. And then it's *not* perfect. But it's wonderful in its own right."

In the end, the blessings they have received match and even surpass the trials they have faithfully and joyfully endured—together.

Friends First

Megan and Nate went to the same middle school and briefly to the same high school in Payson, Utah, even though they didn't know each other then. Then their senior year of high school, they both went to an interschool debate competition. Nate remembered Megan from his old high school, and he had a feeling that he should talk to her. He said hello, and the two of them sat down and began talking. They were close friends from that moment on.

While Nate was on a mission, Megan pursued her education at a private liberal arts college in Utah, graduating with a degree in creative writing. Her academic success came after a lot of hard work and sacrifice. When she was in the hospital, she often had to videoconference in order to "attend." However, she made it to graduation with stellar grades in a field she is passionate about and continues to pursue.

Meanwhile, Nate returned home from his missionary service and gave Megan a call. He was surprised by her enthusiastic response, and they went on their first serious date soon afterward. When Nate brought Megan to meet his family, his brother told him, "I don't know who else you're dating, but she needs to be in the top three."

Nate certainly agreed. As they continued dating, Nate began to pray about their relationship, and every time, he felt that it was "definitely, *definitely* a good thing."

A Step of Faith

Those promptings helped Nate have the faith to propose. But by that point he knew Megan so well and loved her so much, it was a fairly straightforward decision for him. "I got the courage to marry into an illness because of the waves of joy that came to me when I was with Megan. Isaiah 48:18 refers to one's righteousness being as the waves of the sea. That is how I felt with Megan; her goodness hit me like a wave."

In the end, he was overcome with the certainty that marrying her was a good path. In fact, he says, "I felt that if I refused to marry the woman I loved on grounds of her physical health, I would have to answer to God for it. God loves all His children, even the frail ones."

Of her own decision to marry, Megan said, "I always knew that I *wanted* to get married, but when I was born, the life expectancy was 19 or 20. And then, as I got older, I thought, 'Okay, well, I'm living this long—what am I going to do with this life I have?'"

She says, "I think the hardest part for me was processing through what would happen if my husband were to get *remarried* after I passed away. The life expectancy is currently 35, so that would give him a long time to be alone. But would I be OK with someone else coming in?"

Then her aunt Terri passed away in a tragic accident, leaving behind her husband and children. Megan's uncle remarried, and it was encouraging for Megan to see how well his new wife fit in. "And it just made me think, 'Well, it can't be that different.'"

When Nate and Megan got engaged, Nate's family members were supportive, but they wanted to make sure he knew what he was doing. Some of them pointed out to him that they might not be able to have children. "I told them that we would try to have children, and if they came, good. If not, then we would still serve the Lord. And in whatever form they came, we would love them."[1]

Nate's family also had concerns about his finances. He had not been home from serving a mission for very long, and he didn't have much. With Megan's medical bills to consider,

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"Megan is the joy of my life," explains Nate. "I felt that if I refused to marry the woman I loved on grounds of her physical health, I would have to answer to God for it. God loves all His children, even the frail ones."

money would be a real issue for them both. However, still feeling like they were making the right decision, Nate and Megan went forward with faith and joy.

Joy Greater than the Pain

Things were still far from being easy. Because the disease is progressive, Megan's health has only gotten worse over the time she and Nate have been married. When she was a kid, Megan only had to be hospitalized every few years. Now it's typically every four months. She sometimes has new issues come up, whether from CF or the medications used to treat CF. When it seems like they have solved one problem, another comes along.

And yet, always cheerful and laughing, Megan is quick to point out the good parts of her life. "I think I've grown a lot because of CF. You take the Lord for granted a lot when things are going hunky-dory. So when things in your life aren't going hunky-dory very often, it makes you turn to the Lord more. And then when they are, you're super grateful that they're going great!"

Nate says, "Megan is the joy of my life. I've long said that there are compensatory spiritual blessings of joy which the Lord gives to Megan to balance out the difficulty of her illness. These cause me to watch in wonder at how happy and optimistic she is. But since our marriage, I've also been taxed by this illness, perhaps more than I thought possible. Now I've also come to see those compensatory blessings of the Lord come into my life. Jesus Christ is the central figure of our lives. We lean on Him every hour."

Nate has thought a lot about the discussion in his science class, and he, at least, is convinced the world would lose something

precious without people like Megan. "I should have spoken up, but I didn't. I was too frustrated that we were even having that conversation. The world needs more people like my wife, so I hope we have a dozen children just like her, in sickness or in health. The illness doesn't define who she is."

Life Is Better Together, Forever

Overall, Megan and Nate both agree that life together has been "better all around." Nate says, "We make wiser financial decisions as a couple; we think in the long term more as a couple." Together they make the most of each moment they have. "Basically any time we get to be together is a good time—whether or not she's feeling well or in the hospital. It's always good to be around her."

They take a lot of comfort each day from their temple covenants. Nate says, "I see Megan as those covenants describe she can be someday. Of course, I'm amazed at how much progress she's already made. But that gives me the frame that I put her in: this is my eternal companion who will be by my side throughout all of our endeavors."

Megan says, "The temple helps us to make our lives and the time we have more meaningful as well. When we pledge to consecrate all we have to the building up of the Lord's kingdom, it makes me much more eager to say, 'Yes, I will bring so-and-so dinner, even though I'm *super* tired today,' because it's something I *can* do, especially with His help." Nate agrees: "We have too much work to do to have time for pity."

She adds, "And it's wonderful to know that families are forever, that we will continue on through the eternities. Whatever children we are able to have—whether it's now or in the hereafter—will be able to be with us forever as well. That's a wonderful promise, and I take courage knowing that."

Nate says that often the secret to their courage is focusing on those eternal blessings and the joy they are being given here and now. "In some ways, I can say *we* have cystic fibrosis; I know I can't understand all she goes through, but it's become a major part of my life. I've long loved what Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught, that as our lives have increasing trials, our cups of joy are filled accordingly to match the level of trial, even until they are overflowing." ■

The author lives in Maryland, USA.

NOTE

1. In recent times, Nate and Megan have been able to adopt children.

SWALLOWED UP IN THE JOY OF CHRIST

"When we reach a point of consecration, our afflictions will be swallowed up in the joy of Christ. It does not mean we won't have afflictions, but they will be put in a perspective that permits us to deal with them. With our steady pursuit of joy and with each increasing measure of righteousness, we will experience one more drop of delight—one drop after another—until, in the words of a prophet, our hearts are 'brim with joy' (Alma 26:11). At last, the soul's cup finally runs over!"

Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, "Brim with Joy" (Brigham Young University devotional, Jan. 23, 1996), 9, speeches.byu.edu.