

Life in LAMORINDA

Woman's Ordeal Underscores the Fragile Nature of Good Health

By Jennifer Wake



Alecia Larson takes a well-deserved outing one month after returning home from the hospital. Photo provided by Larson

Last December, Moraga resident Alecia Larson, 47, was finishing up what she said was a normal day: a tennis lesson at Moraga Country Club in the morning. "Afterward, I felt a little tired," she said. "I didn't think anything of that."

Later in the afternoon, she felt really exhausted and came down with a 103 degree fever and uncontrollable chills. "I have felt tired and exhausted before in my life, but this was a feeling I had never felt before," she said. "I knew something was terribly wrong."

Feeling better the next day, Larson went about her normal routine, but that afternoon she was overcome by a sharp pain in her lower right abdomen and a few hours later by a debilitating pain be-

hind her right knee. Larson's husband, Spencer, rushed her to the emergency room.

After days of diagnostic tests and blood work, the John Muir Medical Center emergency room surgeon on call, Dr. Gregory Rhodes, told Larson's husband that he "had a bad feeling" about what this could be and said he wanted to do immediate exploratory surgery on her knee; that time was of the essence.

"He then told my husband he would have to 'do what he needed to do' once he got in there," said Larson, who by then had been transferred to the ICU. She was diagnosed with necrotizing fasciitis (NF) - more commonly known as the flesh-eating bacteria. "Luckily, Dr. Rhodes had experience treat-

ing NF and in my case he caught it early," she said.

Necrotizing fasciitis is a destructive infection of muscle and fat tissue. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), NF is caused by the Group A Streptococcus (GAS) bacterium commonly found in the throat and on the skin that comes in direct contact with infected wounds or sores.

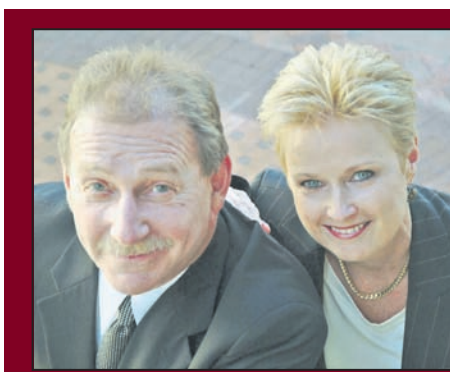
The CDC states that GAS can be present in the throat or on the skin, yet cause no symptoms of disease. "The majority of GAS infections are relatively mild, such as 'strep throat' or impetigo," the CDC states on its Web site. "Occasionally, however, these bacteria can reach parts of the body where bacteria are not usually found, such as the blood, deep muscle and fat tissue, or the lungs, and can cause invasive infections."

Dr. Rhodes drained fluid from Larson's leg and restored blood flow to the infected area so the antibiotics would work. Fortunately, no significant tissue had to be removed.

Larson was extremely lucky. Although NF is an extremely rare condition, with only 500 to 1,500 cases occurring annually in the United States, once contracted more than 20 percent of patients with NF die, and survivors are often left with massive tissue loss causing significant disfigurement and/or disability.

Like many patients who contract NF, the initial cause is often unknown. Larson had nicked her right shin in the last week of November, and although she continued to change the bandage, it did not heal. Larson's doctors cultured the razor nick and could not conclusively prove it was the point of entry for the infection, but were confident there was no other probable point of entry.

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Multiple Births, Multiple Challenges . . . but Tons of Fun!

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Dynnel and Zack Ryan of Lafayette take their twins, Sydney and Preston, 19 mos., for a wagon ride around the block. Photo Jennifer Wake

"They have navigated the often rough waters of middle school and high school, and have benefited from the constant companionship of a best friend and confidante," Kelson said. "The question everyone asks them these days is: 'Are you going to go to the same college?' They don't yet know how to answer."

Along with multiple colleges and multiple activities, come multiple costs.

Mom of three, Lynette Potter, found costs to be much more than expected for her twins Cheryl and Dylan, 2, and older daughter Sarah, 3 1/2. "A double stroller with an optional 'jump seat' by Valco costs nearly \$1,000 - but it's worth every penny," she said.

When Lafayette resident Heidi Madderra had her twins Noah and Emmery 19 months ago, she thought she had enough baby clothes. "But after the first week of them being home, I only had enough clothes for maybe two days," she said. "I have learned about shopping at consignment stores for clothes and toys."

Orinda resident Rosi Kimball received a lot of donated clothes from friends, and gifts from friends and family for 15-month-old twins Jack and Annaliese. "There is also the sale twice a year for multiples where I stock up," she said.

Like many other fathers, Kimball's husband was able to

take 10 weeks off work to help, thanks to the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA). "He helped with every feeding, changing, etc. When he went back to work, the first week was scary," she said. "It was only me."

Rosi went back to work after the babies were 3-months-old. "Luckily I was able to adjust my work schedule to three 12 1/2 hour days a week and one 10-hour payback day a month to make up the 40 hour work week schedule," she said. "My husband cares for the twins one day a week by himself - bless his heart - and we have a babysitter twice a week."

Even Amy Cocotis' 86-year-old grandmother (a retired nanny) watches her 3-month-old twins Josette Marie and Jeaneva Anne once a week.

Cocotis recommends that anyone expecting multiples should join a twins parenting group. "Volunteer to help another member a few hours a week," she said. "It really helped me to prepare by showing me the worst and best case scenarios. I could raise one child in my sleep, I think."

For all these parents, the joys far outweigh the challenges.

"I think everything is more fun with two babies. When we go to grandma and grandpa's, there is one for each to hold," Dynnel said.

"It's still not too late for more," she added with a smile.



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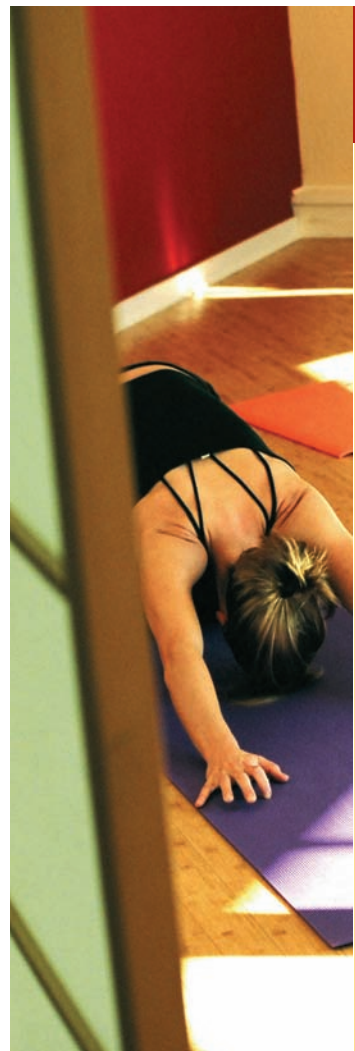
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