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## She acted like she was possessed

**Rare disease put Jenny Nichols in hospital, where she became known as 'the girl on the sixth floor'**

By Ed DuBois

For about two and a half months, Jenny Nichols was known as "the girl on the sixth floor" during hospital care for a very rare condition called anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis. Her notoriety was due to the extreme nature of her symptoms.

Looking back now, Jenny, 27, and her Rockford area family can talk calmly about it, and they can even laugh a little, but while she was ill, her loved ones underwent a living nightmare.

Fortunately, Jenny doesn't remember the many incidents her family can now tell about and describe.

Her dad, Brian Nichols, has written a book about the ordeal. The title was a given, "The Girl on the 6th Floor."

### **Acting possessed**

"It took 30 days to diagnose. It doesn't show up on an MRI or on a CT scan," Brian said.

A CBS News report last year said anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis was first identified in 2007. It is an autoimmune disease that occurs when antibodies harm the brain and cause it to swell. Changes in behavior can involve: paranoia, mania, being dazed, personality changes, acting possessed, and being catatonic, according to the news report.

Brian said the cause of the disease involves a cancer cell in the body, which triggers antibodies that end up attacking nerve endings in the brain. Signals in the brain get blocked or rerouted.

Before medical science discovered and identified the disease, people who suffered from it were institutionalized, and priests were often called to perform exorcisms, Brian explained.

Before his daughter was diagnosed, Brian, his wife, Barb, and their other daughter, Michelle, were desperately asking, "What's wrong with Jenny?"

### **'Like in the movies'**

"We would try to prepare visitors at the hospital. We would say, "This is what you are going to see,"" Brian recalled. "Many turned away and left and never came back."

He added that Jenny's behavior was "like in the movies." "It freaked me out so bad," he commented. "I was never with her in the dark."

Her condition had deteriorated, and she could not take care of herself. It began around the end of March last year and was at its worst at the end of April. Jenny's condition was diagnosed on April 30.

"It took about two weeks to get it turned around," Brian said.

He mentioned the process of determining what was wrong involved 29 tests.

### **Close to the nurses**

"We are still close to many of the nurses at the hospital (Park Nicollet Methodist Hospital in St. Louis Park)," Brian said. "Some of them commented that they drove to work scared to death that they would have to care for Jenny."

He is grateful to the nurses for their efforts. Jenny wanted to leave the hospital, and a goal of her family was to not use restraints. Brian remembers holding her to keep her in her hospital room. He tried reasoning with her, but she would hit the call button and scream.

Brian explained that Jenny was experiencing hallucinations. He could tell from what she was saying that she once thought she was about to be hit by a truck.

"I remember I laughed at the nurses' reactions. It seemed strange to do that, but (under stress) we find a way to cope. Have you ever laughed at a funeral?" he asked to explain what he was going through.

### **She doesn't remember suffering**

Jenny doesn't remember any of it. Lately, she has been reading Brian's book to help understand what happened.

Brian is glad she doesn't remember.

Getting a little choked up, he said, "If she remembered, that means she suffered."

"When I looked in her eyes, I had a feeling she was there, trapped," he added.

Jenny's behavior changed hour to hour.

"Every once in a while something would come through. Some part of her was there. It gave us hope," Brian said. "But we couldn't do anything for her."

Emotions triggered by a memory came forward as he said, "She once felt like someone was holding a pillow on her face, and I couldn't help her."

### **Purpose of the book**

At first, Jenny didn't want to know the story, but now she is reading what her dad wrote.

"I started pulling things together just in case Jenny would want it," Brian said about writing the book.

Another purpose of the book is to tell friends and family what happened. The story involves much more than a person can describe during a relatively brief conversation.

"I had Methodist Hospital review the book, and I have their 100-percent approval," Brian said.

### **People really cared**

He recalled he "had a meltdown" around day 26.

"I thought they gave up," he said about the health care professionals.

"Have you given up on her?" he asked.

He was told everyone was working hard to the best of their ability. Looking back now, he realizes everyone truly cared.

Even the cashier in the cafeteria showed she cared.

"I was getting some coffee. She asked, 'Are you the father of the girl on the sixth floor?'" Brian recalled.

"A lot of people really cared for her," he stated.

### **Back to her family**

The treatment following diagnosis was "shockingly easy," Brian said. It involved steroids and "cooling off the brain," he explained. Five doses of intravenous immunoglobulin (IVIG), a blood product administered intravenously, brought Jenny back to her family. It was administered during a five-day period for about five hours each day in early May.

Jenny was able to communicate around the middle of May. Brian said she wasn't herself physically until July. Some depression lingered, which can happen following a brain injury, Brian explained.

Meanwhile, Jenny has been working her way back to serving as a junior varsity volleyball coach at St. Michael-Albertville High School. She had studied math and sports exercise science at Hamline University and wants to coach and teach for a living.

"When can I go back to work?" she was soon asking upon feeling better.

Besides coaching, she works part-time at Barnes and Noble near Ridgedale. Brian said the company has been great in regard to providing support and keeping Jenny's position open for her.

Brian recalled that Jenny's medical condition was discovered outside the bookstore. She was found unconscious in a snow bank after she had suffered a seizure while walking to work.

"The seizure got our attention," Brian said.

Other problems followed. Jenny started doing strange things, and she would go days without sleep.

During the worst period of time, Jenny's movements were hard to watch.

"The way her neck would twist ... It was the result of mixed signals to the muscles," Brian explained.

### **Initially in eBook form**

He mentioned that only about 1,500 people have been diagnosed with anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis, and it mainly shows up in women. It often starts from a form of ovarian cancer.

Writing a book was a bit different for Brian. He works in the sale of heat processing equipment.

The book is 352 pages long and is initially available in eBook form through Amazon and the Barnes and Noble website.

Reading the book explains why Jenny Nichols was known to most people at the hospital as "The Girl on the 6th Floor."