

## Hoping for a holiday miracle

Exit 289

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Staff writer

This is how Cindy Scinto describes a pending heart attack.

She gasps. Her inhalation seems to suck the color from her cheeks. Her arms recoil at the elbows like traps. Her hands grasp her chest just below her throat, just above the deep purple scar running from her sternum to her collar.

"I get this tightness in the middle of my chest that travels up my neck," Scinto said. "It's just like an elephant sitting on my chest. I take a nitro pill, which helps, but the elephant is back in seconds."

A day without the heart problems is almost unthinkable for the 43-year-old Spokane Valley woman. She spends much of her day sedated on a couch because the excitement of everyday life is too much. Her kitchen counter resembles a small pharmacy.

But Scinto is not taking her cardiac problems lying down. Two months ago when doctors told her they had tried everything, the mother from Greenacres got on the Internet and enrolled in an experimental cloned gene program in Hershey, Pa.

Just give me a seat next to a defibrillator, Scinto told the airline when she booked her flight. She left Spokane on Wednesday, sedated and accompanied by friend Nettie Janke. Scinto's husband John, a U.S. postal worker, and 14-year-old son Jonathan will join her in a week.

Scinto will spend the holidays at the Milton S. Hershey Medical Center where Pennsylvania College of Medicine researchers will try fixing her heart with cloned genes. If successful, the genes will grow new vessels between Scinto's pulmonary artery and heart. The small vessels in Scinto's heart are now clogged and her heart is starving for blood.

The research is free. The airplane tickets, hotel rooms and month of restaurant meals for Scinto's family aren't. There aren't many support services available and she will return to Hershey at least four more times.

"I did call Ronald McDonald House, but I'm too tall," Scinto said, with a wry smile.

As ill as she is, Scinto's charged personality is unbound. Her eyes sparkle when she talks about the days when she could heft 60-pound mulch bags over the back fence. And she insists on making the 30-yard trip to the curb to get the mail, although the walk exhausts her. She would appear normal were it not for the subtle, sleepy undertow of her medication.

Scinto said the procedure is her Christmas miracle. Her Spokane cardiologist, Donald Canaday, considers the experimental procedure a final alternative.

"The reason we got her into gene therapy is because it is the only thing that hasn't been done," Canaday said.



Steve Thompson - The Spokesman-Review  
Cindy Scinto is undergoing treatment in Hershey, Pa., for a heart condition. The Valley woman is in an experimental program doctors say is her last hope.

Doctors in Spokane looked into other gene programs, but Scinto was rejected because she has juvenile diabetes. Canaday suspects Scinto's diabetes is also the cause of her myriad heart problems.

The written history of her cardiac problems since 2001 is seven pages long. Angioplasty, double bypass operation -- Scinto has been there, done that. Twenty-one times in the last two years, doctors have worked their surgical tools up the femoral artery in Scinto's leg all the way to her heart.

The gene therapy isn't life or death, Canaday said, but Scinto would likely spend the rest of her life sedated if the treatment fails, something friends say Scinto couldn't take.

"She's always been full of life and this has been so hard for her because she is very active," said Janke. "This has slowed her down."

Scinto hopes she'll come home in a month, clear some of the brown pill bottles from her kitchen counter and possibly exercise again.

"We are just so grateful for this holiday miracle," Scinto said. "Even though we will spend Christmas and New Years alone in Pennsylvania, we are just happy that I may get some strength and health back."

*Exit 289 is a Monday profile of faces and places in the Spokane Valley. Its name comes from the Pines Road exit from Interstate 90 to the center of the community. Share your comments or suggestions with reporter Tom Lutey at 927-2179 or by e-mail to [toml@spokesman.com](mailto:toml@spokesman.com).*