

## AIDS attacks family, can

*"We're a pretty ordinary family who've been through a pretty unordinary problem."*

**RAY PLANKINTON**  
family of AIDS victims



In September 1991, the Plankinton family gathered for Zoann's wedding. From left, they are Ray, Laura, Sarah, Kurt and Zoann Braasch, Ray, Betty and Ron.

### AIDS

Continued from Page 1

and heard the news.

Sarah was HIV-positive. Tests later verified what Rick had suspected: He and Laura also were infected.

Brother Ron delayed taking the tests. But a year after Sarah's diagnosis, Ron contracted Meningitis. His mother, a long-time registered nurse, suspected the worst. Her fears were well-founded. Ron's tests came back positive.

The disease didn't take root rapidly. Ron enrolled at Buena Vista College in Iowa, graduating in May 1989. He wanted to attend the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, but his health forced him to cancel his plans. But he didn't give up.

The brothers rallied to each other's support. Ron and Rick always had been close — best friends, their parents say. The two were linked not only by their hemophilia, but by common interests. Both loved computers and strategy games.

AIDS brought the brothers even closer. They looked for ways to support each other. They played computer games until all hours, sometimes even pulling all-nighters. They organized game tournaments at the local community college and joined the Society of Creative Anachronism — a group that acts out events from early historical times.

Things seemed to be going pretty well ... for a while.

In September 1992, Ron felt strong enough to leave his parents' care. He bought a house of his own, found a job and seemed able to lead a quiet, normal life.

It was a short respite.

On Dec. 5, Ron came down with an infection and started retaining fluids. He was hospitalized.

By the sixth day of his hospitalization, Ron was convinced he was going to die. He told his mother that.

But miraculously, the infection was gone the next morning. In fact, Ron felt good enough to walk to the bathroom on his own.

It was a fateful mistake. His feet were badly swollen from the water retention. Somehow, Ron slipped and fell. The fall triggered a cerebral hemorrhage, his parents say. Ron became nauseated. Later that day, while sitting in a chair, he had a seizure, then two more in rapid succession.

Ron died Dec. 19.

\*\*\*

The death angered Rick. He felt Ron hadn't fought hard enough, his mother says. Rick refused to be intimidated by the disease. He vowed to fight it to the end.

"It helped to have hemophilia to start with because of all the barriers that I crossed over the years," Rick told the Columbus Telegram in 1993. "This is just another bump in the

road."

Rick became involved in test trials for AZT, even before the government had approved the drug.

"When the UNMC needs a new lab rat, I'm the first one to raise my hand," Rick told the Telegram.

He tried anything that might help — untested drugs, natural cures, even black market products that were made in someone's kitchen in New York City.

"I know he had the hope that he might be able to find something that would protect his family," his father says.

Rick's parents say their son felt a strong duty to look after his family. But that became harder as his disease progressed.

By June 1993, Rick was slowing down. He took longer to make up his mind. Paying bills became difficult. His driving was affected. Finally, the family had to take away his car keys.

That was a terrible blow to Rick, his parents say. It curtailed his frequent visits to his hospitalized daughter.

Rick found it increasingly difficult to do his work at the Norfolk Regional Center. By December 1993, he had switched to part-time. Last June, he retired.

Every person who could get off work came to the retirement party, Rick's father says.

From then on, Rick's condition deteriorated rapidly, his mother says. Rick gave hints that he knew the end was near. He told his mother that he would like a black grave stone with gold trim. He mentioned music he liked and disliked. "Amazing Grace," is nice, he told his mother.

Rick fought on with the same dogged determination, his mother says, but the disease was taking over. "It isn't that you lose," Rick's father says. "There's just nothing left to save."

By last September, the disease had taken a terrible toll. Rick spent two weeks of that month in the hospital. He became paralyzed. He went back in the hospital for seven days around Thanksgiving. By this time, he was taking 70 pills a day.

"He lost his life week by week," his father says.

Rick died on Dec. 31 ... his 33rd birthday.

"Happy birthday, son," Rick's father told him just before he passed away. "You are about to receive a gift far greater than I am able to give you. Peace."

\*\*\*

Sarah's death was more unexpected.

She was active and bubbly before contracting AIDS but eventually couldn't run and play outside. She loved going to school, but could make it to classes less and less each year. Sarah turned to crafts, making little, colored crosses.

"At that time, she knew she was

getting weaker, knew that she was getting sicker, and she was getting thinner," says Kim Pohlman, the school counselor. "She wasn't growing like the other kids were."

Sarah's weight stayed around 50 pounds, but her face turned puffy. Four days before her father's death, Sarah's grandmother took her to Omaha for a check-up to find out why.

"We didn't think the trip to the hospital was going to be the end," Sarah's grandfather says.

But the check-up turned into a hospital stay. Sarah's doctors decided on an operation to change the entry-point for her IV.

Sarah seemed to be doing fine after the operation ... until she developed pneumonia. The family remained optimistic even after Sarah was put on a ventilator. There was talk of taking the youngster home.

Doctors told the family that if Sarah pulled through this time, she would have two to three months to live.

But Sarah didn't go home. The pneumonia was too much for the weakened 12-year-old to fight.

"It was a raging inferno," her grandfather says. "They slowed it down a couple times but could never stop it."

On Jan. 10, two weeks after her father's death, Sarah died in her grandmother Plankinton's arms.

"It was the hardest thing I've ever seen in my life," says Sarah's maternal grandfather, Rob Drozd. "She was just a little girl ... just a little girl."

\*\*\*

Family and friends thought Laura would be the first to go. They underestimated her toughness.

But it hasn't been an easy fight. Laura is almost always bedridden now. She requires constant care. Laura's weight has dropped below 90 pounds. The nerve endings in her feet have been killed by medication, making it difficult to move the 15 feet from her bed to her chair.

Her memory fades at times, the result of AIDS dementia, her mother-in-law says. Laura breathes heavily and coughs a lot.

But Laura doesn't cry anymore. She doesn't get depressed ... about her illness or the loss of her husband and daughter. She doesn't laugh, either.

She can't.

Laura's latest medication is for her psychological condition. Her emotions — pain, sadness — are held in check.

"She just doesn't feel," her father-in-law says. "She knows she should feel something; just doesn't feel. I haven't heard her laugh for months and months and months."

"It's a mixed blessing probably."

Despite her worsening condition, Laura still believes she'll pull through. The Plankintons are more realis-