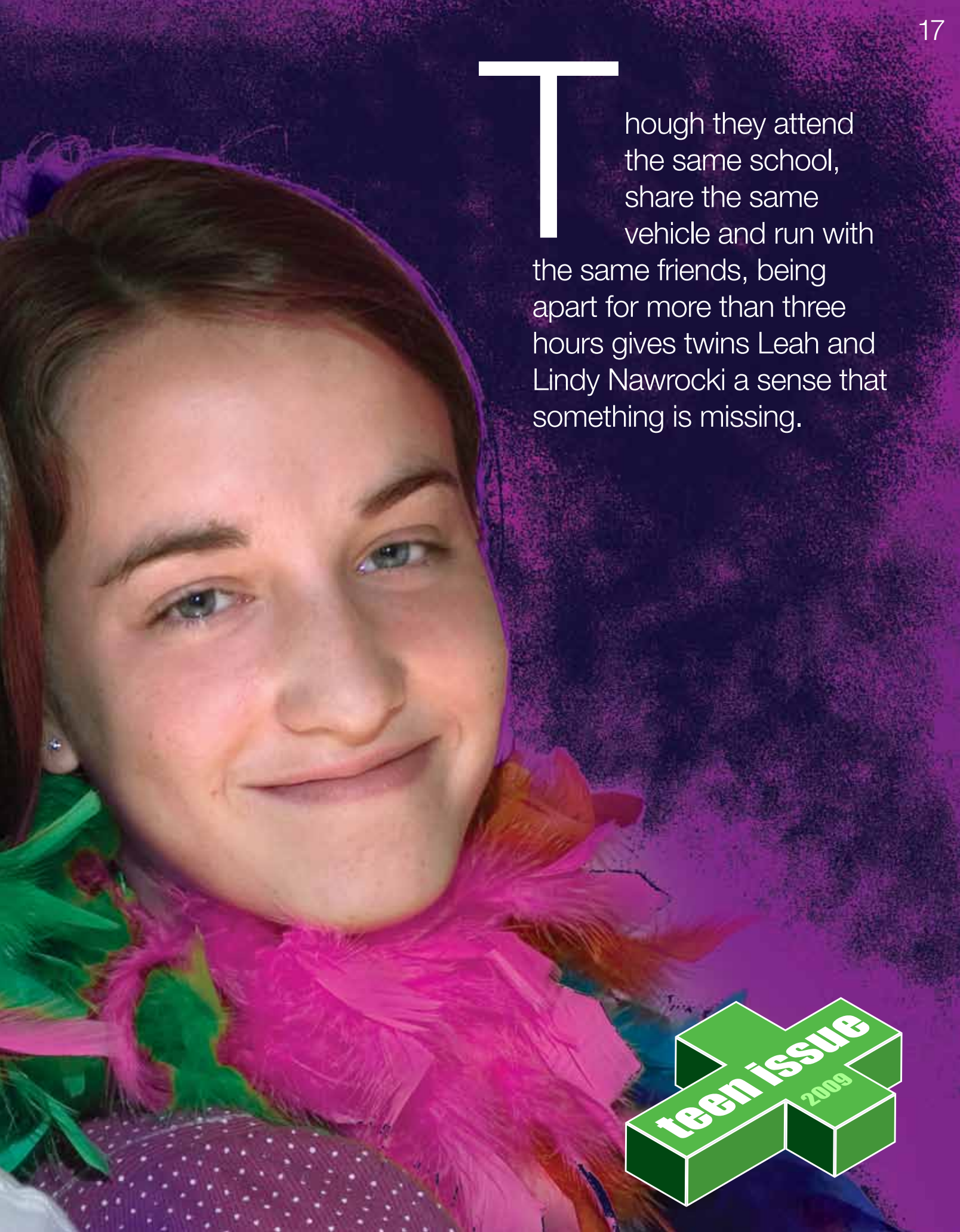


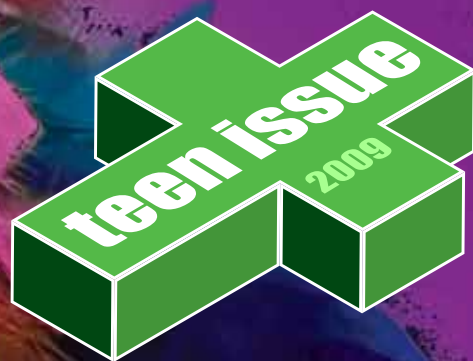
# Faith x2 = Nawrocki twins

John Hogan | Photos by Kathy Denton





**T**hough they attend the same school, share the same vehicle and run with the same friends, being apart for more than three hours gives twins Leah and Lindy Nawrocki a sense that something is missing.





**T**hey remedy that at Catholic Central High School in Grand Rapids by doing something that years ago may have gotten them in more serious trouble than it might today.

“If we don’t see each other for three hours, we’d have notes passed off in class,” Leah Nawrocki said.

The twin connection is thriving even as the oldest children of Joe and Amy Nawrocki begin their senior year and prepare for the possibility of attending different colleges. It’s a union that’s hard to put into words, but you know it is there.

Teamwork is a constant. They help with charity events, participate in sports, and run a babysitting service they call ‘It Takes Two.’ Money from that venture allowed them to buy a 1997 Oldsmobile Bravada.

Most importantly, they pray. They pray individually, with friends, and with their parents and two younger siblings.

“In religion class, we simply learned prayer is a conversation with God,” Lindy said. “Talking with God is like talking with a friend. There are different ways to pray, you don’t always have to fold your hands to pray.”

Prayer was especially important for the family when, Leah, at age nine, was diagnosed with leukemia. It has been more than seven years since the diagnosis and today, Leah is considered cancer-free. What remains, however, is an enriched faith that permeates the twins’ very being.

“Everyone’s faith grew by leaps and bounds,” said their mother, Amy Nawrocki.

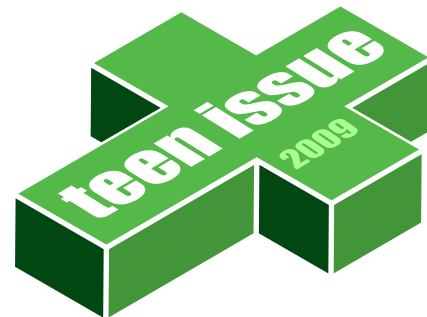
Not that they did not already have a strong faith.

Their father, Joe Nawrocki, is one of five siblings raised in a deeply Catholic household on the city’s Northeast Side. His father, the late Richard Nawrocki Sr., was a long-time officer for the Grand Rapids Police Department.

Joe describes himself as “St. Alphonsus born and bred” having grown up in a home a quarter mile from the church. It is all but certain Joe and Amy Nawrocki’s younger children, Allie, 14, and Braden, 9, will attend Catholic Central.

“They’re following a family tradition,” Joe Nawrocki said. “I’m a Catholic Central graduate, so they’re third generation Cougars.”

Amy is the youngest





>> Lindy (left) and Leah chat with their mother Amy in the kitchen.

**“Prayer was especially important for the family when, Leah, at age nine, was diagnosed with leukemia. It has been more than seven years since the diagnosis and today, Leah is considered cancer-free. What remains, however, is an enriched faith that permeates the twins’ very being.”**

of seven children and grew up in the small Isabella County town of Shepherd, near Mount Pleasant. She was not raised in a religious household, but after meeting Joe, she made the conversion to Catholicism. She became a Catholic in June 1990. Joe’s parents were her Rite of Christian Initiation (RCIA) sponsors.

The family of six live in eastern Kent County, west of Parnell, in a home Joe built 19 years ago. For a time, they made the long drive to St. Alphonsus Church in Grand Rapids, but eventually joined St. Patrick Church in Parnell where the twins attended grade school.

### Faith in action

Despite a busy schedule, the Nawrocki family share meals together, pray together and volunteer together. When the girls were young, and even today, Joe tried to get a front pew for Sunday Mass.

“It forces eye contact with the priest and they behaved better,” Joe says with a smile.

Lindy and Leah recently returned from a mission trip in Baltimore, Md.

with members of St. John Vianney Parish in Wyoming. They were among more than 200 students from across the U.S. helping people in the region with home repairs. The experience heightened their awareness of the various ways God calls people to serve.

“I knew God was guiding me, uniting me with other people and that’s what was really cool,” Leah said of the Baltimore trip. “I saw so many people from all over the country uniting to help others.”

Leah worked with a five-person crew which painted the

home of an elderly woman in the city. Lindy helped paint a home outside the city. In all, approximately 45 crews worked on 33 houses.

“We had a training day where we learned how to cut wood and climb a ladder the right way,” Lindy said.

Not that they did not already know their way around a hammer and saw; Joe Nawrocki has been in the construction business for nearly two decades. Indeed, Leah and Lindy are seasoned veterans at volunteer work. Their resume includes stints volunteering for the Women’s Resource Center, Gilda’s Club Grand Rapids, Vacation Bible School at St. Alphonsus, and untold hours working through Catholic Central. Yet it is their work with the Michigan chapter of the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society which is most personal. They served as team captains for its annual *Light the Night* fundraiser, collecting more than \$1,000 in pledges. A decal for the event is affixed to the back of their Bravada.

They got a little help from their friends, certainly. “It’s really nice to have our friends from school involved,” Lindy said.

### Faith through trials

It’s pretty certain the Nawrocki family would be active in outreach programs even without having a personal connection to an



>> The Nawrocki twins pose with fellow diocesan youth during a break at a work camp they attended in Baltimore, Md. From left are Lindy, Loren Irving (St. John Vianney Parish in Wyoming, Mich.), Kaliegh Fields (also of St. John Vianney) and Leah.

organization like the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. But Leah's experience with leukemia intensified their resolve. In the weeks before her diagnosis, Leah seemed more tired than Lindy, her skin was pale, and the glands in her neck swollen. After missing a few days of school, Amy decided to err on the side of caution and took Leah to the doctor. The first symptom the doctor noticed was an enlarged spleen. Blood work was ordered. They returned home and waited on test results. The date is seared into the family's memory – March 12, 2002.

"When we got the call, Lindy came down and said 'mommy's crying,'" Amy recalled. The kids thought their father had been in an accident.

"That's when Leah said 'No, I think it is me,'" Amy Nawrocki said.

Joe Nawrocki, not wanting to expose his own concern, calmly assured his daughter on that chilly March day that everything would be okay. Even though she was only nine years old, Leah



>> The Nawrocki family heads out on one of their family bike rides from their home in Parnell. Left to right are Amy, Allie, Lindy, Joe, Braden and Leah.

placed her trust in God.

"I'd pray throughout the day and night," Leah said. "I knew I should pray to help me beat it."

Leah spent 10 days in the hospital, including seven days in intensive care. She received radiation treatments and injections of a cancer-fighting drug. Her specific affliction was Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia (ALL), which crowds out normal cells in the bone marrow and can spread to other organs. It can be fatal in weeks to months if left untreated. ALL has a peak incidence rate between the ages of four and 12 with a cure rate of 85 percent in children.

Leah responded to treatment almost immediately. The remission process began less than two weeks after Leah was diagnosed. She got stronger, healthier and returned to school. A year later, the Make-a-Wish Foundation sent the family to Give Kids the World in Orlando. Leah received treatments for 26 months and has been given a clean bill of health.

It's only been in recent years that Leah has come to understand the significance of her diagnosis and recovery. Her bond with family and more importantly, their strengthened faith, are like Teflon.

"Things were going great in my life and



>> The Nawrocki family in the backyard of their home in Parnell. In front, Leah on the left and Lindy. In back row are Joe, Braden, Allie and Amy.



cancer turned that all around,” Leah says. “It helped me to appreciate every day of my life and every day that God gives us. I think things that used to bother me don’t bother me any more. It’s like, don’t sweat the small stuff.”

Lindy’s faith was also enriched.

“Knowing what she went through and seeing how strong she was, my faith was strengthened too,” Lindy said. “Just seeing the way family and friends surrounded us was amazing.”

The sisters pray each day. They say the rosary, read the Bible and quiet

**“ Things were going great in my life and cancer turned that all around,” Leah says. “It helped me to appreciate every day of my life and every day that God gives us. I think things that used to bother me don’t bother me any more. It’s like, don’t sweat the small stuff.”**

their minds to better hear God’s voice. Sometimes, a particular reading Lindy did not get to earlier in the week holds greater significance when she reads it a few days later.

“I’ll read it later and I’ll think I wasn’t supposed to read it until now,” she said.

### Ripple effect of faith

The Nawrocki family motto is taken from words spoken by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and etched on a plaque inside a home rich with religious symbols. “Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.”

Amy is particularly grateful for the outreach of fellow parishioners at St. Patrick Church.

“We hold so near and dear to our

heart what St. Pat’s did for us,” Amy said, her eyes moistening.

Gestures included bringing Leah’s classmates to Helen DeVos Children’s Hospital so Leah could see them outside her hospital window. The kids shouted words of encouragement and held up hand-drawn pictures and words of support. A prayer chain involved people from five countries. And then there was a fundraiser called Laps for Leah. Perhaps most affirming was the quickness in which the cancer was arrested and destroyed. Leah still gets an annual check-up to confirm the leukemia has not returned.

Neither girl has a personality that lends itself to a fire and brimstone approach to prophesying.

It’s more along the lines of St. Francis of Assisi, who once said: “Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary, use words.”

“They don’t talk the talk as much as they walk the walk,” Joe Nawrocki said. “Look what they’re doing here,” he said, referring to the July mission trip to Baltimore. “It is so wonderful to see them hanging around other faith-based kids.”

Being ready and willing to listen, Leah said, is often what others need.

“With friends at school, we try to be there for the person,” she said.

“We’ve learned what people often need in a troubling situation. And that is someone who will listen.”

