

About Audrey Toguchi

Our Speakers



Audrey Toguchi

Hawaii resident and retired school teacher whose recovery from lung cancer a decade ago stunned her doctor and was ruled a miracle by the Vatican.

Father Damien's 'Miracle Woman' Humble Despite Worldwide Fame

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Audrey Toguchi prays to Father Damien every day.

She prays for her family and for strangers who write and call to ask for her help.

Sometimes, she says, she just talks to Damien like she would a friend.

"Father Damien is a very loving man," said the soft-spoken 81-year-old, a retired high school teacher whose cure from an aggressive form of cancer after praying to Damien 11 years ago was the second miracle attributed to the Sacred Hearts priest, which assured his elevation to sainthood.

"As long as you're a human being, he loves you and all you have to do is ask for help."

The Vatican declaration of Toguchi's cure as a miracle has gained the 'Aiea resident wide attention, making her a household name for Damien devotees around the world. It has also made her one of the most important figures in the decadeslong journey to give Damien the title of "saint."

But Toguchi says she isn't interested in fame, but rather in telling her story to provide inspiration to others.

"I look at St. Bernadette and I look at the Blessed Mother. These are great people, but they never went out and bragged about what happened. They were very humble, and so they are models for me," said Toguchi as she sat in a lounge last week at Hawai'i Medical Center-East, the hospital where she was diagnosed with cancer in 1998 and where doctors would later marvel at her cure.

For Toguchi, part of being humble is about praying for others who ask for help. She couldn't estimate how many prayer requests she gets monthly from around the world, but said the number is far too high for her to keep count.

"I talk to him (Damien) constantly and I ask him for help for other people," she said. "There are people from all over asking for help and so I ask for help for them."

She added, "It's the good Lord that helps us, but Father Damien puts the good word in."

The Rev. Damien de Veuster, who ministered to Hansen's disease patients in Kalaupapa, Moloka'i, from 1873 to 1889, when he died from the disease at age 49, will be canonized Oct. 11 in Rome before an expected crowd of 10,000 people. Toguchi, along with 11 Hansen's disease patients who still live full- or part-time in Kalaupapa by choice, will be among the attendees. Dr. Walter Chang, Toguchi's physician who diagnosed her cancer and documented her cure, will also be at the canonization.

Onlookers say the event will be all the more moving because of their presence.

"I think it's going to be an incredibly emotional day," said Brother Greg O'Donnell, the past president and CEO of Damien Memorial School, who will also travel to Italy for Damien's elevation to sainthood. "You're going to see these people" who were a part of the process to honor Damien.

"They're going to be there."

The Roman Catholic Church started investigating Toguchi's case in 2003.

It took five years, and a host of interviews, for her healing to be officially called a miracle.

The declaration by the church marked a major milestone in the long road toward Damien's elevation to sainthood.

The cause for Damien's sainthood was officially introduced in 1955 — 66 years after his death. The first miracle attributed to the Belgian priest was the cure of a French nun in 1895, who was dying of a gastrointestinal disease and recovered overnight after praying to Father Damien. The Vatican approved the miracle in 1992. The second miracle clinched Damien's elevation to sainthood. It also threw Toguchi into the spotlight and earned her the title "miracle woman."

It's a nickname she doesn't take to. Instead, she said, Damien deserves the credit.

"His (Damien's) own impact is really to have people realize that they're special," she said.

In medical terms, the disappearance of three cancerous tumors in Toguchi's lungs with no treatment is called a "spontaneous regression" of cancer — a rare phenomenon of which there are between 500 and 800 documented cases dating to 1900. Chang, Toguchi's doctor, wrote about the phenomenon in a 2000 Hawaii Medical Journal article in which he also described Toguchi's case.

Chang said spontaneous regression in the form of cancer Toguchi had is even more rare.

Toguchi first went to Chang because of a mass on her hip. In January 1998, a biopsy revealed that the hand-sized lump was pleomorphic liposarcoma, an aggressive cancer of the fat tissues. The mass was subsequently removed and Toguchi underwent radiation to stop the spread of cancer.

But in September 1998, Toguchi got more bad news.

A chest X-ray showed three tumors in her lungs.

"It came back as the same cancer that she had from the left hip," Chang said last week. Chang recommended chemotherapy and was a bit taken aback by Toguchi's response.

"Mrs. Toguchi said, 'No. I'm going to pray to Father Damien. And I remember my words very well, very clearly, I said to her, 'Mrs. Toguchi, prayers are nice, but you still need chemotherapy.'"

Toguchi had visited Kalaupapa before being diagnosed, when she prayed to Father Damien.

After being told her cancer had spread, she continued to pray to Damien.

Then, in October 1998, she went back to the hospital for another visit with Chang.

New X-rays showed the tumors in her lungs had started to shrink. Subsequent X-rays in November and December showed the tumors continued getting smaller. Then, in May 1999, tests showed the tumors had disappeared. And a follow-up test in August 2000 showed no signs of cancer.

Chang, who is not Catholic, doesn't call Toguchi's healing a miracle.

Instead, he dubs it a "remarkable event."

"She had cancer of her lung," Chang said. "She had three obvious cancers on X-rays."

He added, jokingly, "I tell her that she is the living embodiment of heaven's favors."

Toguchi, who graduated from Sacred Hearts Academy, said she grew up learning about Father Damien and his selfless service to Hansen's disease patients. She said there was never a question of whom she would go to for help in the event she fell ill.

"If you knew somebody who was so kind and loving to people and he was so close by, doesn't it make sense you would go to him for help?" she asked.

Toguchi said she still remembers well the day she learned her cancer had spread.

"I saw everybody else get tense, but I guess you're looking at a real ignoramus because I figured, 'I'll put myself in your hands dear Lord and Father Damien' and said, please, please help me," she said.

"The rest," she added, "is history."

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