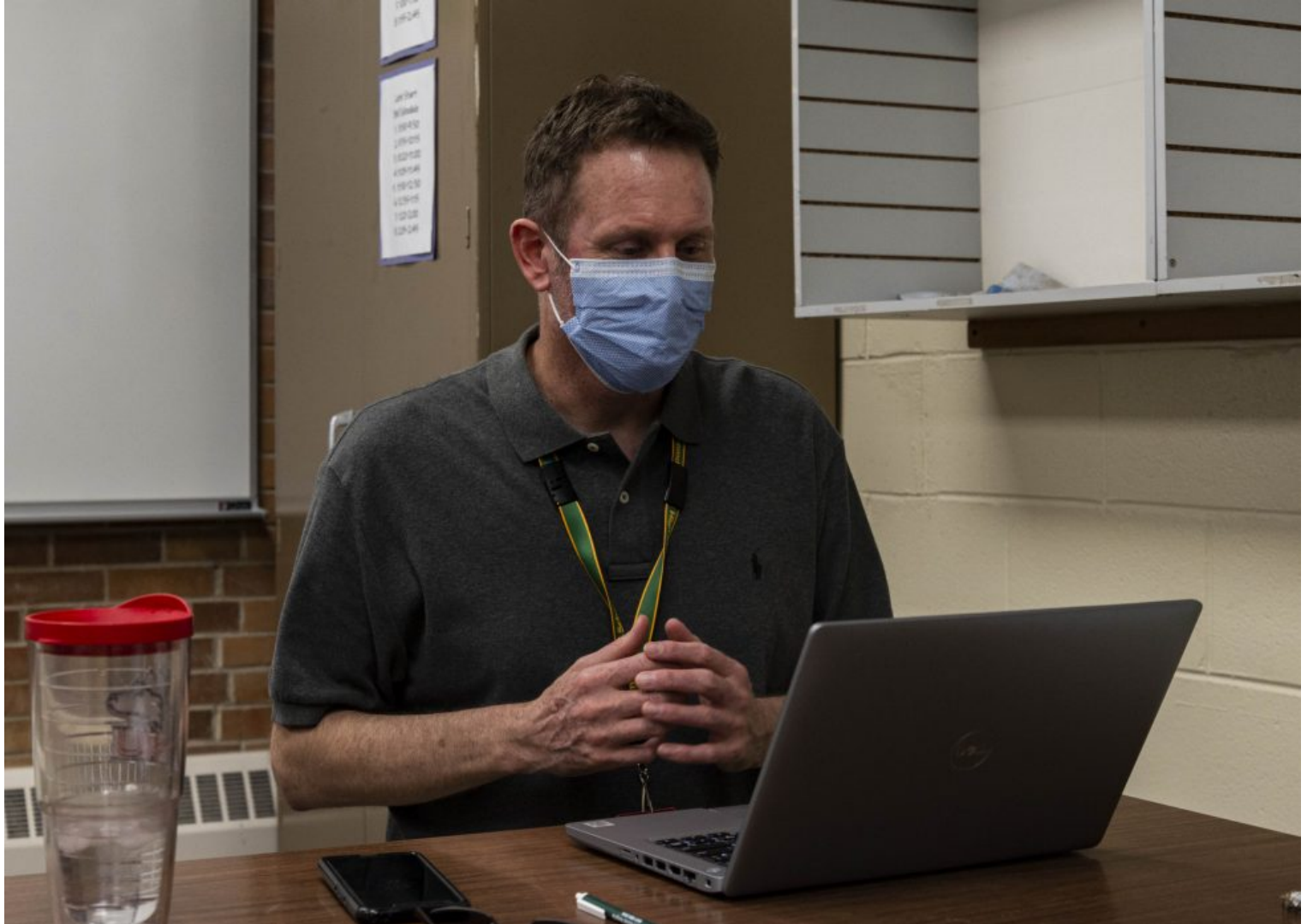


D211 POST: FREMD TEACHER MAKES TRIUMPHANT RETURN FOLLOWING CANCER BATTLE



William Fremd High School special education teacher T.J. Valacak meets with students on Zoom during District 211's first day of school August 13.

During a homecoming pep-rally at William Fremd High School on September 20, 2013, special education teacher T.J. Valacak said he wasn't feeling very well. This day was the latest in a series of days feeling fatigued. When he spoke to his doctor the next day, he received a shock.

"I got a call from my doctor after they had run some blood work, and he said 'hey you have to get to the hospital. It looks like you have leukemia,'" Valacak said. "At the time I didn't know what that would entail. I thought I would have to get it checked out, maybe see a doctor a couple times a day. I didn't leave the hospital for a month."

Valacak was informed that he was suffering from two different forms of leukemia.

"I couldn't just stick to one," he said. "The predominant form was ALL (Acute lymphoblastic leukemia).

The doctors create an aggressive treatment plan for Valacak which include chemotherapy, radiation treatments, and a bone marrow transplant. During his treatment, Valacak had to search for a bone marrow donor who matched with him.

"I was lucky enough that my sister was a match," he said. "I had the transplant on November 13.

Though he started showing improvements following the transplant, and the leukemia was gone, by late August 2014 Valacak noticed he started having new complications.

"It's what they called graft versus host disease," he said. "Things started getting worse and worse with problems in my lungs and skin."

For the next three and a half years, Valacak and his family looked for solutions to the newest complication. In January 2018, a new medication seemed to be the solution.

"It didn't really help me get better, but it put an end to the downward slide I had been going through," he said. "By 2019, I was able to start getting immunization shots to build up my immune system which had been non-existent since 2013."

Through his lengthy battle, Valacak said he received an outpouring of support from his colleagues.

"When I was first diagnosed [the school] had a night for me at one of the games," he said. "They did a color run. People have continued, though this whole process, to check-up on me."

He added that support came from across District 211.

"It's not just people from Fremd," he said. "People from the administration, teachers and coaches from the other schools, were reaching out. The support has been incredible."

After completing the immunization shots in March 2020, Valacak was cleared to fulfill one of his major goals, a return to William Fremd High School.

"Fremd is a family. It's a second home," Valacak said. "Not leaving on my own terms was definitely a motivation to try to get back."

Valacak said walking back through the doors to return to work on August 13 was an emotional experience.

"It felt like, 'You made it. You hit a goal,'" he said. "The excitement was winning out more than anything. I felt proud walking in."

Two of the biggest changes Valacak said he noticed after his lengthy absence were technology and personnel.

"We're a technology world now," he said. "There is so much technology involved in the day and in the delivery of education than when I was last here.

"There's a lot of new faces here," he added. "There are some who have retired or moved to other positions within the District."

He noted that Dr. Lisa Small was principal at Fremd on his last day and is now the superintendent.

Valacak said for anyone facing severe obstacles, he encourages them to keep pushing ahead.

"We have a saying from the NIU fight song: Forward together Forward," he said. "There's too much here on this earth to have it any other way."