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SCHOOL FRIENDS SHOW COMPASSION FOR CHILD

Youngster wages battle with neuroblastoma

By REBECCA MORTON Staff Writer - Dec. 17, 2008

The Simpkins family of Old Bridge received an early holiday gift this month. Just days into December, Kelli and Shameil Simpkins learned that a tumor that had been found in their daughter Nia, 4, was gone. The family also received \$9,036 to put toward their daughter's medical costs as a result of fundraising efforts at the Goddard School®, Route 520, Marlboro.

Nia was diagnosed with stage 4 neuroblastoma a few days prior to her fourth birthday in August. Neuroblastoma is a rare form of cancer that affects children.

According to the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center's Internet Web site, each year there are about 650 new cases of this form of cancer diagnosed in the United States. It is usually found in young children and it accounts for half of all cancers in infants. These solid tumors, which take the form of a lump or mass, may begin in nerve tissues in the neck, chest, abdomen, pelvis, or, most commonly, in the adrenal gland. The tumors may spread to other areas of the body, including bone and bone marrow.

The cause of neuroblastoma is unknown, but most physicians believe it is an accidental growth that occurs during normal development of the sympathetic nervous system, the Sloan-Kettering Web site explains.

Kelli Simpkins said there were not many noticeable symptoms prior to Nia's cancer diagnosis. The youngster had frequent fevers, but doctors had attributed them to various viruses. It was when Nia began limping that her parents knew there was more to their daughter's condition.

Shameil Simpkins explained that the cancer had spread into Nia's thigh at that point, causing the child to limp. The little girl spent her fourth birthday at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital, New Brunswick, after being diagnosed just days earlier. Nia visits doctors at Robert Wood Johnson and at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

Kelli and Shameil recalled how the staff at the Goddard School®, which Nia and her sister, Nyla, 3, attend, sent a gift basket to the hospital.

Kelli Simpkins said Nia is known as the "Princess Girl" at Robert Wood Johnson because of the blanket featuring Disney princesses that Nia brings with her to every treatment. The blanket was a part of the gift basket sent by the Goddard School®.

Shameil Simpkins said he felt awkward when he decided to ask the school's administrators if they would be able to help with a fundraiser, especially because of the current economic climate.

But Carol Vargo, who owns the Morganville Goddard School location, was one step ahead of him.

After reading a previous Greater Media Newspapers article that discussed a walkathon that was held for a young boy in Marlboro who also has neuroblastoma, Vargo said she started to look for fundraising ideas for the Simpkins family.



Nia Simpkins, 4, (l) accepts envelopes filled with donations on her behalf from Madison Goldman, 2, at the Goddard School® Marlboro. Nia, who attends the school, is waging a battle with neuroblastoma, a rare form of cancer that affects children. The Goddard School® held a fundraiser to help the Simpkins family cope with mounting medical bills.

Vargo decided to send a letter to the parents of children attending the school to alert them to Nia's situation. In the letter she asked that parents spare \$10 for the child and promised to match the total amount that was raised.

She was amazed by the amount of money that was raised. Between donations from parents and staff members a total of \$4,518 was raised in a three-week time frame. On the morning of Dec. 8 Vargo signed a check matching the donated amount, bringing the total to \$9,036.

"I was amazed by the generosity of the community, especially in this economic climate," Vargo said.

Mr. Scott "The Music Man" is a local children's entertainer who frequently visits the Goddard School®. When the family learned about Nia's condition, Mr. Scott provided her with a compact disc full of the fun songs she had learned during his performances at the school. When the drive to raise money began, Mr. Scott asked that his payment be put into the collection for Nia, Vargo said.

Vargo said the Goldman family of Manalapan donated \$1,000 to Nia. Madison Goldman, 2, presented Nia with the large stack of envelopes containing the donations. Craig and Stephanie Goldman were teaching their daughter the meaning of Thanksgiving at about the time the letter from the school was sent out. They told Madison they were thankful for her and her sister Samantha's good health, and made the decision to help the Simpkins family.

"It's (the donation) for her (Nia) to get better," Madison told Kelli and Shameil when she presented the envelopes to them.

Shameil and Kelli Simpkins were extremely grateful that people were willing to donate and help their daughter.

"Angels come in many disguises. These people have acted as angels for Nia's life," Shameil Simpkins said.

Nia had been expected to undergo surgery to remove a tumor during the week of Dec. 8, but her parents were relieved to announce that the surgery was not needed because the tumor had disappeared.

Kelli Simpkins said doctors believe the chemotherapy her daughter underwent helped to dissolve the tumor. She said Nia is still going to have a few more rounds of chemotherapy and will eventually face the prospect of a bone marrow transplant.

Vargo has kept Nia's spot at the Goddard School® open so that on days when the child is feeling up to it, she spends the day with her friends and classmates. The chemotherapy treatments caused Nia's hair to fall out, so nurses from Robert Wood Johnson came to the Goddard School® prior to Nia's return to explain the hair loss to the children.

Vargo said the nurses came in with dolls and explained that Nia had been sick and lost her hair. No one wanted to see Nia being pointed out due to the loss of her hair, but Vargo said the children barely noticed and were just happy to have Nia back.

Nia's parents have not fully explained their daughter's condition to her because they did not want to upset the youngster. Instead, Nia's parents tell her what may happen to her during a new procedure.

The family said Nia focuses on her reason to get better — a trip to Walt Disney World in Orlando, Fla. Kelli and Shameil explained that during the week their daughter was diagnosed with cancer, the family was supposed to be at the Disney theme park for what would have been their daughters' first time. Nia knows that once she is healthy again she can go and finally meet her favorite princesses in person.

Nia's parents said they are grateful for and in awe of the generosity the Goddard School® community has shown them. Shameil Simpkins said it was amazing to see how reaching out to one person could spread so much.

Vargo will still collect any donations that people wish to send to Nia. She said checks can be made out to Kelli Simpkins and sent to the Goddard School®, 50 Route 520, Morganville, NJ 07751.