

Making spirits bright

Ill kids depart for North Pole

BY AILEEN WINGBLAD
STAFF WRITER

Sickness and disease take no holiday — not even at Christmastime.

This sad fact of life is learned all too early by seriously ill children, our youngest victims of cancer and other life-threatening afflictions.

Yet sometimes the Christmas spirit shines through so strongly that illness and its pain take a back seat for a few precious hours, making way for the joys and pleasures of this season of giving.

And if there's anything sure to bring a smile to a child — even one who's seriously ill — it's a trip to the North Pole to meet jolly old St. Nick.

Some 50 area youngsters, all suffering from diseases such as leukemia, other cancers or sickle cell anemia, were treated to this special holiday adventure a couple weeks ago, when they climbed aboard an L-1011 jet at Detroit Metro airport. Destination: Santa Claus Headquarters, The North Pole.

The fantasy trip is an annual event for sick children throughout the area, put on for the past 10 years by Silverliners, a group of former Eastern Airlines flight attendants. The flight is simulated, of course, as the plane taxis from the international terminal, circles the airport and rolls into the domestic terminal where Santa and his elves welcome each tiny passenger to a holiday party. Businesses and organizations contribute gifts, decorations and refreshments for the gala celebration.

Event 'just wonderful'

"An event like this is just wonderful," said Lori Phillips of Livonia, who accompanied her three-year-old daughter Mallory on the trip. "It's really very heartwarming to have such special



Festive mood: Livonia's Mallory Phillips, wings pinned on her dress and a balloon hat upon her head, is ready for a trip to the North Pole.

cial people reach out and show they care. People like this make you feel good about what is going on in the world, that there are giving, caring people out there. They give you hope."

Mallory was diagnosed with a rare soft tissue cancer in her nose when she was 16 months old. After three surgeries and one year of chemotherapy, Mallory is now cancer-free. She undergoes scans every few months in case the cancer returns, and will continue to do so for the next several years. She still uses a feeding tube for meals, however.

"But Mallory looks great and feels great. So many of the other kids on the trip just weren't feeling well and are so very sick. It's really devastating and my heart goes out to them and their fam-

lies. I know what they are going through," Phillips added. "An event like this really brightens things up and makes a difference for us and the other families."

Keeps spirits high

And keeping the spirits up for these very sick children is critical to dealing with their illnesses, added Marian Grothaus of Rochester Hills, who made the trip with her daughter Bethany, age 4.

"When a child becomes sick like this and a family goes through this type of situation, it is very, very strenuous in many ways. My husband and I are always trying to do something to raise Bethany's spirits, to see her happy and having fun. A positive mental attitude is a very important part of battling diseases," Grothaus said. Bethany was diagnosed with leukemia Aug. 4 of this year.

"Bethany really enjoyed this special day of pretend. It was funny because she knew we never really left the ground but it didn't matter to her at all. She just figured the pilots were tired or something. When we started caroling, one of the stewardesses picked her up and she sang right along. It was really very, very nice. And while the kids were given presents and everything, what mattered more was the warmth of the people there and the true caring that we felt," Grothaus said.

Provides common bond

Another parent, Diane Leccr of Farmington Hills who attended with her daughter Danielle, 6, said that events like this give a seriously ill child an opportunity to do things they otherwise couldn't because of financial and other restraints such illness puts on a family. Likewise, the children can share a common bond with the challenges they are facing.

"Danielle has had a rough four years," Leccr said. "She was diag-



Ready to fly: Four-year-old Bethany Grothaus of Rochester clings to her mom, Marian, as they enter the cockpit of the jet.

nosed with leukemia when she was 2 1/2 and went through two years of treatment. She was fine for a couple of months, but then relapsed. She's now finishing up two more years of treatment and hopefully this will be it.

"All her hair is grown back but there was a time when she went to school bald and was around all the other kids when she had no hair. When we go to these kinds of events Danielle is with other kids who deal with the same thing she has been dealing with, and that helps."

Kristen Schoonover of Orchard Lake, is a flight attendant with American TransAir, which provided the plane, and one of 15 chosen to volunteer for the North Pole trip. "Even though it's tough to see the children so ill, it is really rewarding just to help someone in need. Just watching these kids' faces light up when they get on the plane and when they meet Santa is so wonderful."

"We're trying to give these parents and their kids a happy

memory, a happy time with the child. Wonderful memories of laughter and smiles."

Schoonover admitted that sadness can creep into her thoughts when she's around



such sick kids. "Last year when I volunteered for the flight, I stopped for a moment and every thing started to sink in. I started to cry. Who wouldn't cry for that child and family? If you didn't have those emotions, you wouldn't be human. I find it helps to separate the illness from the child. Think of them as children, not seriously ill children, and that you are giving to them and helping them."

"We are giving them a way to forget what they've been going through, a way for them to get back to being kids again, to do what other kids do. It's just a little bit of an escape for them. And knowing that I helped make someone's day, someone's Christmas a little brighter makes me feel like a better person."

"Giving of one's self, feelings, friendships, family and the love behind it — that's what Christmas is all about," said Margo Saylor of Farmington helped put together the event.



Money chain: Members of Cub Scout Pack 45 — including (front row, from left) Mike Kish and Chris Clark and (back row) Cubmaster Calvin Clark — show off the money they collected with Teresa Winnicki and Longacre Principal William Smith.

Longacre goes the mile

BY LARRY O'CONNOR
STAFF WRITER

She is only a year younger but they're separated by 750 miles. Longacre Elementary staff, parents and students were still close enough to care. And they gave a school secretary a Christmas present for which she'll be ever grateful.

The school raised \$1,793 as part of a third grade community service project in honor of leukemia patient Erin Briggs, 6, who lives outside Omaha, Neb. She is the granddaughter of Longacre secretary and Farmington resident Teresa Winnicki. Longacre's generosity didn't stop there.

A group of PTA parents drummed up another \$350 with a bake sale and on Thursday, Cub Scout Pack 45 of Longacre donated \$90 from a popcorn sale.

Briggs is scheduled to undergo bone marrow transplant surgery at Duke University Hospital in February or March.

Money raised will allow Erin and her mother, Jeanette, to stay at a nearby Ronald McDon-

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ald House in Durham, N.C. Erin is expected to be in the hospital for at least three months.

Winnicki was overcome with emotion when presented with a money chain by scouts on Thursday. Their gesture was a complete surprise.

"We've just been overwhelmed by the thoughtfulness and caring of the people in the community and at Longacre," Winnicki said. "These people are just wonderful here."

Erin was diagnosed with leukemia in March after doctors found a tumor above her left eye. The girl was having headaches. Doctors initially diagnosed her as having a sinus infection, Winnicki said.

Another physician, reacting on a gut instinct, ordered a CAT scan and found a tumor the size of the girl's fist above her eye.

Erin has undergone surgery twice, including a procedure to remove and freeze bone marrow that will be re-transplanted. She'll also undergo chemotherapy treatments, Winnicki said.

"She's been the spirit that really keeps us going," Winnicki said. "She tells her mom to get a grip; she'll be OK. She's just wonderful."

Third grade teachers Trudy Danloy and Elaine Gilbert asked Winnicki if they could donate money to the Ronald McDonald House in Durham in Erin's name. The school's PTA offered to do the same.

Money raised should more than cover Erin's account. Whatever is leftover is being donated to help with medical expenses for a Russian girl, who also has cancer.

"Our children are actually helping two little girls," Winnicki said.



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