

Family rallies to fund treatment

By BILL COUTANT
Staff Writer

Vanessa Wells is a gregarious second-grader who loves to play with her German shepherd-collie mix dog, Susie, and says art is her favorite subject in school.

And if you didn't know better, watching her seemingly unlimited energy, you might think she could conquer the world, given enough time. But time is now an enemy for the Farmington Hills girl and her mother, Mary.

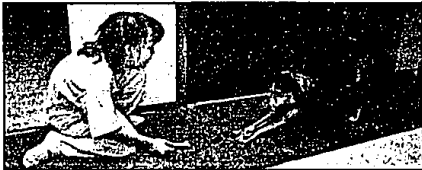
"I noticed some differences when she was an infant," said the mother of three.

But it wasn't until Vanessa was 6 that doctors diagnosed her condition as Friedrich's ataxia, a rare degenerative nerve disorder. There is no known cure for the disease — in the United States.

Vanessa had CAT scans, MRIs and other sophisticated tests, and saw neurological specialists. But other than physical therapy, it seemed that there was little that could be done to stem the disease, which could leave her paralyzed by the time she's a teenager.

"It was very frustrating," said Mary Wells, who has two other daughters, Nicole, 10, and Billy Jo, 3. "They (doctors) basically told me to accept it."

So she tried various natural



Playful friend: Vanessa Wells keeps busy with her dog, Susie.

healing techniques, medication that eased the shaking symptoms, and other methods. But the results were, at best, mixed.

"It was hard to tell if it was helping or not," she said.

Then she heard about two Livonia brothers who had been treated for the condition by a German physician, Dr. Hans Niepier. "The oldest one is 30 and he's doing fine," she said. "They were treated 10 years ago by Dr. Niepier."

Wells said the mother of the brothers found out about Niepier's treatment by chance at a beauty parlor.

But like many of the treatments available here, Niepier's treatment was not accepted by the

Federal Drug Administration and was not covered by insurance.

Wells, who is laid off from her job as a waitress and separated from her husband, could not afford more medical treatments out of her own pocket, much less the trip with her daughter to Hanover, Germany.

Wells went ahead and scheduled a June visit to Hanover, and found plenty of support from her sisters. They formed a group, Mothers for a Cause, to raise money for the trip and treatments. Wells expects the cost to be about \$6,000.

Theresa Kennedy, one of Wells' sisters who is organizing a "Spring Fever Ball" benefit for Saturday, said although family

members could not afford to pay the way for Vanessa and her mother, they have plenty of ideas on how to raise the money.

"We know a lot of people," Kennedy said.

Kennedy said she had been surprised to learn that there was a known cure for her niece's condition but that it wasn't approved in the United States.

"We wondered why it's kept a secret in the U.S.," she said. "People we have talked to have found that it (treatment) not only stops the disease, but that people have some return of function. They are able to walk better than before."

The "Spring Fever Ball" will run from 1 p.m. to midnight at the Community Center of Farmington/Farmington Hills, 24705 Farmington Road in Farmington Hills. Entertainment will include Tinker T. Majic Clown, karaoke music for kids provided by Lario Ross, the country and western group Billy Blues providing dance music.

Tickets for the ball cost \$5 for children, \$15 for adults and \$25 for a couple, and will be available at the door. For more information, call 473-2968 or 474-2313.



Mother and daughter: Mary and Vanessa Wells think about their trip to Germany.

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