

One little girl's wish is fulfilled by hospice caregivers

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Superior Stanton is only 4, but, like so many little girls, she has long wanted to be a princess. And while those who love her are somberly aware they won't be able to make all her childhood wishes come true, this was one they could do something about.

Surrounded by family, neighbors and a room full of staff and volunteers from Heart to Heart Hospice at her grandmother's home in East Columbus, Superior's dream of glittering party dresses and shimmering crowns came true Wednesday.

In a small wheelchair festooned with bouncing balloons, she was the center of attention in her beaded blue frock and tiara at her pre-birthday party. Superior's actual birthday isn't until January, but Wednesday seemed a fine day to celebrate a bit early.

The festive occasion, organized by her compassionate hospice caregivers, was one of a cherished few in the past 13 months — ever since Ashley Burnette's youngest daughter was diagnosed with incurable diffuse brain stem glioma, a devastating type of cancer.

Early sign

The first troubling hint that something was wrong was one day last fall when Ashley, 28, noticed that her daughter was unstable.

"I watched her over the weekend, and on that Monday, we went to the doctor," she relived. As initial and subsequent tests results came in, a growing dread mounted. What soon lay ahead was seven weeks at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tenn., where Superior underwent radiation every morning.

Heart to Heart Hospice entered the family's life in June and has become a welcome ally in caring for Superior.

"They have been so wonderful, just wonderful to us," Ashley said, her grateful relief evident. "Diane, her nurse, comes twice every week to spend time with her, checks her temperature, blood pressure, weight and everything. And she always brings her milk and cookies," she added with a tremulous smile.



Four-year-old Superior Stanton's wish to be a princess was granted with a birthday party organized by her hospice caregivers. Her regular nurse, Diane Triplett, holds the cake for her young patient. (Photo:Roberson)

Registered nurse Diane Triplett monitors Superior's condition and medications. Steroids have caused the child to gain 40 pounds in just the past three months. "And it's been about a month now since she was able to walk," Superior's mother shared.

"It's totally different," Triplett said of caring for her first patient this young. "She's a special girl. I have a lot of empathy because I have my own children who are 2 and 5 years old."

Compassionate hospice care

Jackie Nason is the community educator for Heart to Heart, one of several hospice providers in the Golden Triangle. Her mission is to help the public understand what hospice really is. "Some people don't really know; they're afraid of it," she stated. "We want people to understand hospice is there for the whole family."

When a patient is no longer responding to cure-oriented treatments, hospice — through a team of physicians, registered nurses, home health aides, social workers, chaplains and trained volunteers — provides physical, emotional and spiritual support for the patient and family, at home.

The team, "on call seven days a week, 24 hours a day," is focused on relieving suffering and providing dignity and quality of life for those facing serious illness.

"Hospice is about living every day to the fullest," Nason stressed.

A good heart

The need for volunteers to provide direct and indirect support is ever-present.

"Volunteers can provide comfort and company by reading to patients or carrying out small errands, like trips to the grocery," said Heart to Heart Volunteer Coordinator Stephanie Frison. "Some do light housekeeping or cooking. Others provide indirect support by sending cards, making crafts we take to patients, baking or helping in the office. No experience needed: just time and a good heart."

National Hospice Month

November has been declared National Hospice and Palliative Care Month. Palliative care focuses on reducing the severity of disease symptoms and is not dependent on prognosis.

A proclamation signed by Columbus Mayor Robert Smith Nov. 3 reveals that, last year, more than 1.4 million Americans living with life-limiting illness, and their families, received care from hospice and palliative care programs and that more than 400,000 volunteers contribute 18 million hours of service to hospice programs annually.

"We encourage everyone to increase their understanding and awareness of hospice care and how it can help," urged Nason. "It's for everybody. It doesn't matter whether they have five cents or a million dollars. No one is turned away; patients are accepted for care based on health need, not ability to pay."

The birthday party

As Superior's party progressed, her 6-year-old sister, Aries, and 8-year-old brother, T.J., helped her blow out candles and open a steady stream of princess-pleasing presents. Cinderella coaches, a plush horse and a bright pink "laptop" computer joined the array of gifts.

The honoree's grandmother, Diane Webb, laughed when it became obvious Superior was anxious to hold on to a \$10 bill that came tucked inside a birthday card.

Webb welcomed her daughter and three grandchildren into her home in mid-October, after Ashley had to leave her job as a manager at Prairie Pointe Chevron to care for her daughter.

Ron Thomas, the jovial hospice chaplain and pastor of Broadacres United Methodist Church in Columbus, attended the gathering and offered a prayer. Afterward, he remarked, "Through this, I've met some remarkable people. ... Superior is one of them."

When most of the guests had left and the house grew quieter, the princess rested in her parent's arms, her head tiredly lolling on Ashley's shoulder.

"She's my angel," the young mother said, describing a child who loves music, likes to write and color and would ask for chicken for breakfast, lunch and dinner if she had her way.

"My first reaction when we got the diagnosis was, 'Lord, how am I going to get through this?' At first I wasn't a strong person," she shared with emotion. "They told me it was a rare cancer and they didn't have a cure. I got on my knees and prayed and prayed ... and something just finally told me that it was going to be all right."