

Spirit of a Champion

**Chatham patient
chosen as state
spokesperson for
Children's Miracle
Network**

Written by Karen Carlson • Photography by James Hawker

L Lydia Hannah grabs the hands of her sister and brothers, and the crew plays “Ring around the Rosy” on the trampoline in their back yard, bouncing up and down with carefree glee. Today is a good day for Lydia, who has been fighting cancer for the past three-and-a-half years. She’s an active 10-year-old, who loves playing with her siblings and swimming in the family pool. She hopes to get a horseback-riding lesson in a few weeks. She looks to her mother to see if she’ll get to go. “We’ll see what your platelets are,” her mom says. Lydia gives her a knowing look.

Most 10-year-olds don’t know what platelets are, much less know that the count will determine their activities for the day. But children with cancer, like Lydia, face that question every day, almost every hour.

“One minute she’ll be rarin’ to go,” says her mom, Elizabeth Gregurich. “The next minute, she’s exhausted.”

Lydia was chosen from children in three Illinois hospitals to be the 2007 Illinois Children’s Miracle Network National Champion. She was among the 50 child ambassadors at the CMN Champions Across America celebration in April at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida. En route to Florida, Lydia, her mother and sister met President George Bush and stumped for CMN on Capitol Hill.

The thrill of being the CMN Champion has gotten Lydia through these last few months of difficult chemotherapy and radiation treatments. Her family, friends and CMN buddies celebrate her courageous fight against the disease that has plagued nearly half of her life.

Lydia is a shy, polite girl, with a beautiful face and sweet, high-pitched voice. She was just 6 years old when her pediatrician, Dr. Lorie Bleyer, (SIU School of Medicine class of 1989) discovered that her persistent cough and sickness was leukemia. “It was a shock,” Gregurich recalls. “We found out she had cancer at 6 a.m., and by 10:30 a.m. she was in treatment.”

To treat the cancer that was infecting her bone marrow, Lydia endured spinal taps, chemotherapy and radiation. The strength of the chemotherapy was sometimes stronger than Lydia’s little body could take, putting her in the hospital instead of playing outside.

With the help of the staff of the SIU Cancer Institute and St. John’s Children’s Hospital (a partnership with SIU School of Medicine), Gregurich says she was able to overcome the shock of having a child with cancer and focus on what needed to be done.

“I can’t thank them enough. They are so knowledgeable, loving and caring; it’s amazing how special these people are,” Gregurich says. “They’re willing to answer our questions at 2 a.m. if we have them. They’ve been the link that has helped our family survive this — physically and mentally.” The family includes Lydia’s stepfather, Chris Gregurich, her sister Madison, 12, and brothers Gabe, 5, and Alex, 3.

The family knows the pediatric oncology clinic at the SIU Cancer Institute well. The clinic is located in the St. John’s Children’s Hospital in the Carol Jo Vecchie Women and Children’s Center. It’s become their second home, Gregurich says, and the faculty and staff have gone out





Justine Morgan, R.N., gets Lydia ready for a chemotherapy treatment.

of their way to make it feel that way. “Every nurse, doctor, intern and security officer speaks to Lydia as she walks in,” Gregurich says. The team even found a crib for Lydia’s newborn brother so more of her family could stay with her at the hospital.

“It’s amazing how well-equipped The St. John’s Children’s Hospital is. We’re so lucky it’s here,” Gregurich says.

After two years of fighting the cancer, autumn of 2005 seemed like a new beginning for the family. Lydia neared completion of her treatment, and all in all, it hadn’t been that bad. Lydia had maintained pretty good health and had a mop of curly brown hair. But then, a routine spinal tap exposed more leukemia cells. Lydia had relapsed, but this time the cancer was attacking her spine and central nervous system.

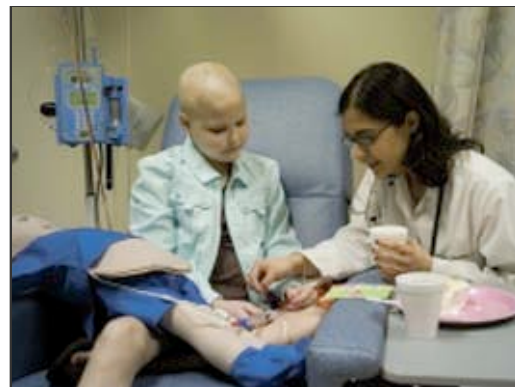
So doctors continued their efforts with stronger doses, determined to annihilate the cancer. Stronger medicine meant a stronger toll on Lydia, with more fatigue, more flu-like symptoms, pneumonia, and more time in the St. John’s Children’s



At home, Lydia nurses her brother Gabe’s sore foot.



Dr. Gregory Brandt helps Lydia get a head start on her medical skills.



Dr. Bhavna Sacheti visits Lydia during a celebration of the beginning of the maintenance phase of Lydia’s treatment.

Hospital. The curls were lost, as were her fingernails. Her limbs stiffened easily, making it sometimes difficult to walk and climb stairs.

But Lydia has come through this second phase, and on an unusually warm day in March, she sits demurely in a brown and green spring outfit and flip-flops. Her fingernails have returned and are painted a rosy pink that matches her toenails.

“I’m going to wear this outfit when I go to Florida,” she says.

Lydia looks so small in the big chair, but the



“Lydia is the toughest person I know.”

love and strength of those around her who care, combined with the strength of medicine, is sustaining her.

“She’s a tough little girl,” notes Gregory Brandt, M.D., assistant professor and chair of the SIU Division of Pediatric Hematology and Oncology, Department of Pediatrics. “She’s been remarkably resilient.”

On most days that she receives treatment, the fourth-grader, who is home schooled, is reading or doing homework, maybe working on math (her favorite subject). But it was a special day in the clinic when Lydia’s medical friends came by the clinic to celebrate the end of her intense chemotherapy and radiation and the beginning of the gentler maintenance phase.

“This is the end of the hard stuff,” her mom says, sitting with Lydia in the treatment room.

The maintenance phase still seems pretty hard: chemotherapy for the next 50 weeks, with weekly

visits to Dr. Brandt’s office and daily oral medication at home.

“There have been no leukemia cells in her since the first month, so the medication is working,” Gregurich says. “The question is what happens when she’s off the medication.” A group of residents stopped in to say hello. Gregurich and Lydia greets them like family.

“She’s an upbeat, energetic kid,” notes Bhavna Sacheti, M.D., a second year pediatrics resident. “I’ve gotten to know her and her family very well. They are a lovely family.”

Surrounded by her friends, one can feel the love in the room. “We think she’s pretty special,” adds Justine Morgan, R.N.

Lydia is especially close to Morgan and Melanie Reynolds, R.N., who work in Dr. Brandt’s office. “They cater to Lydia like she is their very own,” Gregurich says. Lydia used to want to be a teacher when she grew up. After years befriending the SIU staff, Lydia now wants to be a nurse. She even has a doll that she uses to practice her nursing skills. The doll’s name? “Well,” says Lydia, “Sometimes she’s Justine, and sometimes she’s Melanie.”

While anyone would enjoy all the attention, Lydia just wants to be like all the other girls, without the fatigue, the sickness, the hair loss and the hospital stays. Mostly, Lydia wants to return to school with her friends. “She wants to be normal,” her mom says.

Certainly, Lydia is not your average kid. Her years of battling cancer with a courage and strength that any adult would envy has given Lydia a unique character, blending the spirit of a typical 10-year-old who loves the singer Fergie, with an adult maturity that gives her the discipline of doing homework and taking her medication without complaints. She has developed a grace and independence all her own.

“Lydia is the toughest person I know,” her mom says. “I’ve had people with cancer who say to me, ‘Lydia’s my inspiration. If she can do it, I can do it.’ If this happened for Lydia to help other people be strong, then so be it. That was the reason.” ●●●



Children's Miracle Network is a national fundraising organization that raises money for children's health-care programs and services, helping children with all types of afflictions: cancer, heart disease, cerebral palsy, accident victims and others.

All funds raised by CMN stay in the area, benefiting children like Lydia, whose treatments and services are partially funded through CMN at the St. John's Children's Hospital, a partnership with SIU School of Medicine.

SIU School of Medicine employees participate in numerous fundraising events for CMN throughout the year. Here's what's coming up:

- May 21: Book Fair
- June: Box Lunch
- July: Change drive
- August: State Fair ride tickets
- Sept. 28: Book Fair
- Oct. 15-26: Third Annual Fantastic Basket Raffle
- November: Holiday bus trip