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Plush Monkey Connects Cancer Patient To Class

Toy Promotes Empathy, Communication

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POSTED: 10:39 am CST December 1, 2011
 UPDATED: 11:35 am CST December 1, 2011

OMAHA, Neb. -- Savannah Kniewel hides behind her pink princess mask when she's feeling shy or sick, and she's worn that disguise quite a bit lately. The 7-year-old Omaha girl was diagnosed with lymphoma just before Halloween.

"She just had pain her abdomen. It caused her not to walk very well and we thought (maybe it was) growing pains," said LeAnne Kniewel, Savannah's mother.

Savannah just completed a week-long stay at Children's Hospital and Medical Center where she received in-patient chemotherapy. A small plush monkey is hooked to her I.V. pole.

She hasn't attended her second-grade class at Westbrook Elementary in Omaha's District 66 since mid-October. She said she misses her friends and all her activities including dancing, swimming and jumping on the trampoline at home.

"She still wants to be a part of her class and they make her feel like she's still there. I love that idea," said Savannah's dad, Rob Kniewel.

Savannah's desk is not empty. In her place sits a large plush monkey, wearing a yellow shirt, a pink hat and smile. Students take turns writing in the monkey's journal and toting the stuffed toy to music and gym class.

Savannah gets the journal, photos and a full account of everything going on at school when the monkey's backpack is delivered to her each Friday.

When she feels up to it, she writes back to her classmates.

"The monkey sits in her chair while she's gone and a little monkey stays with Savannah at the hospital," said child life specialist Melissa Epley with Omaha's Children's Hospital and Medical Center.

Epley learned about the "Monkey In My Chair" program last year and she's quick to order a kit for her child cancer patients who will miss a significant amount of school. The kits are offered nationwide by a nonprofit group dedicated solely to child cancer patients.

As part of the program, the child development expert went to Savannah's classroom and explained the girl's illness to her friends.

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"I talked about what cancer means, what treatment is like and how Savannah feels about missing school," said Epley.

Epley left the monkey behind with instructions to let the toy sit in for Savannah so she doesn't miss out on anything.

Savannah's friends feel a connection to her, even when she's not in class.

"When I see the monkey, I think of Savannah," said 7-year-old Jaidyn Smith.

"It's really scary thinking of her having cancer and everything else like that," said 8-year-old Asleigh Yost, "I just want her to feel better and we really miss her."

Epley said the monkey helps children communicate and understand the situation.

"It's important for the patient while they're here to remember they're part of the class, the class is not forgetting them and for the kids to be empathetic to someone in the hospital dealing with an illness," Epley said.

Savannah's teacher, Debbie Kirchhoff, reinforces that message every day.

"We don't want this to be a big mystery. We want them to know she's sick and she'll soon be back. We talk about her all the time," said Kirchhoff.

Savannah's parents hope she'll return to school by February. A home-school teacher has just started visits with her .

The girl's school is holding a spaghetti dinner and fundraiser on Friday, Dec. 2, from 5 p.m.-9 p.m. at Westbrook Elementary, 1312 Robertson Drive. Admission is \$6.00 for adults and \$4.00 for children. A fund is also established at Wells Fargo Bank under an account called "Savannah Smiles."

The school is also planning several other fundraisers for the family including a school-wide hat day.

All proceeds go to the Kniewel family to help with medical and living expenses. In addition to dealing with Savannah's cancer, the family's business burned down earlier this year.

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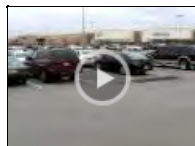


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