

Journal keeps memories alive



The Enquirer/Amanda Davidson

Keith Desserich helps his daughter, Gracie, 6, sign "Notes Left Behind" at Barnes and Noble Saturday. The Desserich family put together the book after losing their daughter, Elena, to a brain tumor last year.

Publication may help others

By **Peggy O'Farrell**
pofarrell@enquirer.com

KENWOOD
Gracie got the big pink marker. And she used it like a pro, spelling her name out one letter at a time in book after book Saturday afternoon.

All for a sister her parents are determined to help her remember.

Gracie and her parents, Keith

and Brooke Desserich of Wyoming, spent the afternoon at the Kenwood Barnes and Noble Booksellers store, signing copies of their new book, "Notes Left Behind - 135 Days with Elena."

The book, in journal format, tells the story of Elena Desserich's battle with inoperable brain cancer. She was 6 when she died in August 2007.

When Elena was diagnosed

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Elena Desserich, 6, died of brain cancer last year. Her life is remembered in a journal.

Journal: Keeps girl's memories alive to help other families

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with diffuse brainstem glioma, doctors told her family that she would probably live about 4 months – 135 days.

She made it to 255 days before succumbing.

Gracie, now 6 herself, is old enough to read aloud from the book. It takes her a while to sound out some of the words, her mother said.

Keith Desserich started keeping a journal when they got Elena's diagnosis. Gracie was only 3 at the time, and he worried she was too young to remember her sister.

So he and Brooke began noting all the small things that made up Elena's days, like trips to her favorite chili parlor or to look at the wedding dresses in store windows in nearby Reading.

"We just started putting down all those memories, those accounts so Gracie would have something to remember her sister by," Keith Desserich said.

Gracie said her favorite memories of her sister are "when she played with me."

There's a lot to remember. Elena loved drawing and painting, and her artistic streak captured the community's heart when a painting she called "I Love You" was displayed at the Cincinnati

Art Museum.

It hung in a gallery filled with works by Pablo Picasso, her favorite artist. Prints were sold at the Wyoming Art Show. The image of a colorful heart has become the symbol of The Cure Starts Now, a charity founded in Elena's memory to raise money for pediatric cancer research. Prints of the painting are available online at www.thecurestartsnow.org.

Elena underwent treatment at St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tenn., and at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center.

Gracie helped raise money for St. Jude's by riding 71 laps in a "trike-a-thon" fundraiser at her preschool.

Both hospitals offer Web sites so family and friends can keep up with patients' progress, but the Desserichs wanted something more private, and decided to post their journal on the family's Web site, www.desserich.org.

"We figured it was safe because the only people who can spell 'Desserich' are family," Keith Desserich said.

But the Web site started crashing, and it didn't take long to figure out why: Every day, between 8,000 and 12,000 visitors were logging onto the site to read the latest journal entries.

Nervous about the attention, they stopped updating the site for a few days, "but we started getting all these e-mails from people who told us how much it helped them relate to their own kids," Keith Desserich said.

They started posting updates again.

After Elena died, friends suggested they publish the journal as a book, but the family resisted. Finally, a friend convinced them the book could help raise money for their foundation.

Brooke Desserich said she had "very mixed feelings" about the book. It's hard to see their private memories made public, but she hopes it will help draw families closer.

The publisher, Pen and Publisher, printed 10,000 copies of the book, but the Desserichs know they'll need more. In addition to local attention, "Good Morning America" will feature a segment on the family on Friday.

Dozens of people lined up Saturday to have their copies of the new book signed.

Molly Brown of Independence told the Desserichs about her son, Miles, who was 8 months old when he was diagnosed with a tumor on his spine.

Now 3 years old, Miles is doing fine, Brown said, but Elena's story "brings tears to my eyes."



Brooke Desserich signs "Notes Left Behind" at Barnes and Noble on Saturday. She says she hopes the journal will help draw families closer.

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Amanda
Davidson