

WEEKEND

Opening today: 'Spider-Man 3' loaded with villains, plot lines

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## Girl's dad tells of his 'hero'

Imagine being locked in your own body. Imagine not being able to speak, walk on your own, see, or even swallow your own food, while having complete cognitive abilities and independent thought. Imagine waking up every morning and experiencing the sensation of losing the use of another finger, toe or limb at a pace that shuts down your entire body within weeks. You are trapped, without hope or without a lifeline to the world around you. Your disease is



Elena

diffuse brainstem glioma, an extremely rare form of terminal, inoperable brain cancer. Now imagine you are just 6 years old.

Diagnosed in November 2006, Elena Desserich was given just 135 days to live. She is on day 151. She is being treated at St. Jude Hospital and at Cincinnati Children's Hospital, where she is undergoing experimental treatments. Today she is wheel-

chair bound, unable to speak and unable to use her right hand, yet she epitomizes courage that adults twice her age cannot imagine. She is a hero, and she is my daughter. From Cincinnati, she loves Skyline Chili, watching the Bengals and anything that Picasso painted. Her dream was to one day be an artist and a teacher with her pictures in the art museum. Today is her day.

— Thank you, Keith Desserich

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This painting by Elena Desserich, 6, of Wyoming, will be displayed this weekend at the Cincinnati Art Museum. Elena is undergoing treatment for inoperable brain cancer.

# Girl smiles through the pain

6-year-old's love on display this weekend at Art Museum



The painting "I Love You" is part of the Art Museum's Family First exhibit.

By Peggy O'Farrell  
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A trip to the Cincinnati Art Museum made Elena Desserich smile Thursday.

The trip made all the difference in the world to her parents, Keith and Brooke Desserich.

"Her smiles are precious right now," her father said.

Museum officials showed Elena, 6, where her painting will hang Saturday and Sun-

day - right smack among the Picassos in Gallery 229.

For the Wyoming kindergarten, it is a dream come true, Keith Desserich said.

She is battling inoperable brain cancer and undergoing treatment at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tenn.

Doctors found the tumor on Elena's brainstem in November.

They estimated she had about four months to live.

Elena, who has blondish-brown hair and a smile that turns her cheeks into apples, has beaten the odds so far.

But doctors haven't yet found an effective treatment for her type of tumor.

It's a grim diagnosis, said James Geller, a pediatric oncologist who specializes in brain cancer at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center.



Provided photo

Elena Desserich, 6, has always loved to draw and paint. She has kept at it through treatment for inoperable brain cancer at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

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THE ENQUIRER

LOCAL NEWS

## Elena: Girl smiles through the pain

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The cancer can't be surgically removed because of its location. Radiation can slow the growth of the tumor, but children rarely survive much longer than a year after the cancer is found.

The treatment is tough on a 6-year-old. Her father noted Thursday that Elena was worn out and taking a nap after her trip to the museum.

The cancer makes parents and doctors feel equally helpless.

"Every time a neuro-oncologist looks at an image of one of these tumors or gets a call talking about displaying these symptoms, you do get this feeling of dread," Geller said.

"You feel it right away because you know the conversations that are going to follow with the parents and the decisions they're going to face and you know how it's going to end."

Elena and her parents are working with researchers at St. Jude on

new treatment options. Doctors at Cincinnati Children's referred them to the hospital. If the research won't help Elena, Desserich said, it might help the next child who develops the cancer.

"As parents, you feel powerless. You feel like there's something you have to do. You stop having tears, you stop having tissues. And you realize you have to do something that makes a difference," he said.

The family has set up a Web site, [www.desserich.org](http://www.desserich.org), to raise awareness of the cancer and the importance of supporting research to find treatments. They're also working to set up a national foundation to raise money for research, Desserich said.

Family members knew something was wrong with Elena when she started losing her balance, and kept falling. Her voice became weak. An MRI revealed the mass in the core of her brainstem.

Elena has struggled as the tumor continues to grow. She has headaches and double vision. Her

right side is partially paralyzed. She can't talk anymore.

She can read and write, and learned sign language from a book her parents gave her.

She's always loved to draw and paint. Luckily, she's left-handed, so she's been able to keep up her artwork since doctors found the cancer.

But the tumor is growing, and she's starting to show signs of paralysis on her left side, her father said.

Some families might be reluctant to let their child participate in research that, odds are, won't work, Desserich said.

Still, it's impossible not to hope that the next therapy might make a difference.

"At this point, you try everything, because there's nothing you can do that's worse," he said.

Through the Web site, Elena gets cards, letters and e-mails from people all over the world.

Family and friends can also follow her progress with the disease.

The whole family has gotten involved in fighting Elena's cancer.

Her younger sister, Grace, raised more than \$3,000 for St. Jude through a "trike-a-thon" at the care center she attends. She's pledged to do so many more promising donors that she will ride 101 laps on her sister's behalf. "Everyone figured she'd do 15 or 20 laps," Desserich said.

Grace actually made 71 laps and stopped only because it started raining, he said.

Elena picked the painting that will be displayed this weekend from several she drew at school.

The family contacted the museum and her painting is included this weekend's Family First Saturday event. The artwork was hung in a popular spot where it's sure to attract plenty of attention.

It's a big, bright picture of a heart in reds, silvers and blues.

"She calls it, 'I Love You,' Desserich said. "It's a pretty simple and a pretty simple picture, it's everything."