

Little girl's family celebrates fourth anniversary of a life-saving transplant

By Diane Wilkins, Marion Daily Republican, wilkins@mariondaily.com
Published: Friday, June 22, 2007 10:59 AM CDT

MARION —How do you celebrate a “rebirth day?”

For 5-year-old Jaelyn Sanders of Herrin, it was the chance to play with a baby tiger.

Jaelyn was diagnosed with leukemia when she was only 9-months-old and underwent chemotherapy, but was losing her battle.

The doctors at St. Louis Children's Hospital said that she would need a bone marrow transplant to have any chance of survival.



Jaelyn Sanders sits on the lap of her guardian, Diane Curry as they pet Jenny the baby tiger at the Illinois Centre Mall last week. (DIANE WILKINS PHOTO)

A matching donor was found in Germany and the little girl began the arduous regimen to kill off her immune system so that her body would not reject the life-saving transplant.

The bone marrow transplant was conducted in June 2003.

Diane and Ken Curry, who are guardians of the courageous little girl, say that the little trooper won the hearts of all of the doctors and nurses as she battled for life.

Jaelyn's mother was a single parent who wanted the best for her little girl, and recognized that with Diane being a nurse, Jaelyn's chances for survival were better with the Currys.

“Jaelyn is an encouragement for all young patients and their families that are facing the same type of situation,” Diane Curry said. “She is proof that this thing can be beaten.”

Jaelyn has one more year before doctors will officially proclaim her “cured,” but there is no sign of any type of cancer cells in her body.

“At the time she was undergoing the treatments, we really felt badly because of her young age,” Diane said. “But, now I believe it was a blessing, because she does not have any strong memories of the treatment. To her, a trip to the hospital for a check up is a great adventure.”

When asked how the family made it through the long period, Diane was quick to answer.

“Through prayer and a lot of support! That is the only way you can face the ups and downs of this kind of situation.”

She said the staff at Children’s was outstanding and that the National Children’s Cancer Society have been a tremendous help.

“NCCS provides screening, education, emotional support and financial help to children and their families during and after the treatment experience,” Diane said. “They are a tremendous resource. The Bone Marrow Clinic is one of the best in the country.”

She also said the the Ronald McDonald House in St. Louis was a “God-send.”

“Jaelyn could not leave the area after the transplant even though she was released from the hospital,” Diane said. “We spent 100 days at Ronald McDonald’s after the transplant.

When asked if she had any advice for others, Diane said that if you see any signs in your child’s health, have it checked out. Early diagnosis is so important. Don’t ignore symptoms. And if you do face this type of situation, remember that there are resources out there to help you. You are not alone.”

As Diane told her story, Jaelyn sat quietly petting the baby tiger draped over her lap. When she left the cage, as a typical 5-year-old, she was ready to find some other adventure at the mall.

“People have been so supportive through the years, and I am glad we have the opportunity to let everyone in Southern Illinois how well Jaelyn is doing,” Diane said.