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TOAST OF THE TOWN

Gifts provide boost for youngsters with heart problems

Grateful family happy to return favor

Posted by the Asbury Park Press on 03/22/07

BY ALESHA WILLIAMS STAFF WRITER

MANALAPAN — Jennifer Meyer of Manalapan recalls the comfort she felt whenever an anonymous gift would arrive for one of her daughters, hospitalized after surgery for heart defects.

"It would always surprise me that there were people out there doing stuff like that — that some stranger you never met would take the time to knit a blanket or buy a stuffed animal for someone they'd never meet," said Meyer, 37.

Meyer's 4-year-old daughter, Grace, was born with hypoplastic left-heart syndrome, a potentially fatal heart defect. Grace had a three-stage surgery to give her single-ventricle heart function.

Meyer's 2-year-old daughter, Madelynn, was born with coarctation, or narrowing, of the aorta, which doctors repaired through surgery at birth.

Today, Meyer, her husband David, and their daughters are the kind strangers bearing gifts.

The Meyers were among 10 families who visited St. Christopher's Hospital for Children in Philadelphia on Feb. 13 during Congenital Heart Defect Awareness Week for the Congenital Heart Information Network's Build-A-Bear Workshop program.



(PHOTO: COURTESY OF MEYER FAMILY)

David and Jennifer Meyer of Manalapan with their daughters Grace (holding balloons), 4, and Madelynn, 2, at St. Christopher's Hospital for Children in Philadelphia during Congenital Heart Defect Awareness Week.

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CHIN's Philadelphia chapter, of which the Meyers are members, stuffed and assembled 70 bears at Build-A-Bear's Langhorne, Pa., location. They distributed the CHIN T-shirt-clad bears to children at Philadelphia and Delaware-area hospitals including St. Christopher's.

CHIN funds, as well as donations Meyer solicited herself, supported the project, she said.

"It's obviously bittersweet, but it feels good that we were able to give the parents something to show that there's somebody out there for them if they need support and give them a place to go if they need resources," Meyer said.

A member of CHIN for about two years, Meyer said the national, nonprofit organization provides information, online support groups and financial assistance for families of people with heart defects and disease.

"CHIN is important because parents of children with heart defects find themselves in a unique position — other parents are going through just normal baby things, whereas you constantly have to make sure your children are eating OK, they're growing, there's nothing wrong," Meyer said. "It's very stressful and you need to know you're not alone."

She said Grace's condition can cause low oxygen levels, shortness of breath, limited stamina and other symptoms for which she must take daily medication for the rest of her life.

Meyer said doctors still do not know how long a child born with Grace's defect is expected to live. She added that she hopes that her family's efforts with CHIN, such as their participation in an upcoming CHIN walkathon at a Pennsylvania amusement park, one day will lead to better understanding of and treatment for the heart defects that affect her children.

"I want someone to say, OK, Grace has got 80 years like everyone else," Meyer said. "Hopefully, what we're doing will get us to that day."

ON THE WEB: Visit our Web site, www.app.com/reporters, and click on this story in the Western Monmouth Reporter for a link to: Congenital Heart Information Network

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