

# Miracles evade explanation, but are always welcome

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some cancer treatments try to produce. But because a biopsy was never done, it was also possible that the lump was another type of tumor that regressed, said Dr. Katherine Matthay, a pediatric oncologist at the university.

Since leaving the hospital, Brandon has been a bundle of energy, constantly jamming on his keyboard and playing with his 5-year-old brother Ryan, his mother said.

On a recent shopping trip to the mall, Brandon asked Santa Claus for a Lilo & Stitch doll. His mom says he can look forward to a train set and building blocks, too.

The Connors plan a quiet Christmas Day at home, thankful that the dark cloud of Brandon's illness is gone. Then, they'll fly to Missouri to visit relatives who haven't seen Brandon in months.

Sometimes Kristin Connor feels survivor's guilt about their good fortune while so many other children are suffering. She has raised \$150,000 for research into rare childhood cancers.

"We were given a miracle to help these other children," she says.

For Tim Kaczmarek, a 48-year-old father from Natrona Heights, Pennsylvania, hearing his own heartbeat is living proof of his second chance at life.

The history teacher and basketball coach collapsed inside a Wal-Mart store this summer after a massive heart attack that nearly killed him. After emergency quadruple bypass surgery at a local hospital, he was transferred to the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center where doctors reopened his chest and implanted a mechanical pump.

The device immediately took over his heart's job of pumping blood through the body, letting his own organ rest. Doctors fully expected Kaczmarek to stay on the pump long enough to get a heart transplant.

There have been cases of heart patients who were weaned off the pump, but usually those had only a brief recent history of heart failure. Kaczmarek was an unlikely candidate for such a recovery because he had suffered his first heart attack almost 10 years earlier.

But after a month and a half on the pump, doctors saw such improvement in his heart function that they unhooked Kaczmarek from the machine.

"It's relatively unusual to see a patient like him recover from a major heart attack," said Dr. Robert Kormos, who runs the artificial heart program at Pittsburgh. "It was a pleasant surprise to find that he had enough cardiac reserve

to be able to heal and have a good, functioning heart."

Pump-free since July, Kaczmarek is recuperating at home in hopes of returning to teaching next year and ultimately, coaching again. He feels lucky to have a second chance at spending the holidays with his wife and two daughters, ages 20 and 22.

"It's a miracle," he said. "You can't believe something like this happens to a person and you're still here to talk about it."

Two years ago, Stacey Perrotta discovered a mysterious lump in her stomach. Sometimes it stuck out like a golf ball. It never hurt or bothered her, and when she pushed it, she could hear it pop back in. For four months, she tried to ignore it, hoping it would go away. Finally, a week before a routine doctor's checkup, she told her mother.

Stacey was referred to the Golisano Children's Hospital at the University of Rochester Medical Center where a scan revealed a large tumor. Not knowing if it was cancerous, surgeons removed the softball-sized mass.

The diagnosis was devastating: Stacey had desmoplastic small round cell tumor, a rare cancer normally found in teenage boys. Only 20 percent with the disease survive.

Doctors in Rochester had never treated anyone with this cancer before. They pored through the medical

literature and consulted other cancer specialists. Then they decided on a course of treatment that included extra high doses of chemotherapy followed by radiation.

"When I started looking at how kids with this disease did, I thought, 'Oh boy. This is not good. This is going to be tough,'" said Dr. David Korones, a pediatric oncologist.

Doctors credit Stacey's positive attitude as aiding in her recovery.

People have a natural capacity to heal, said Dr. Herbert Benson, a professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and president of the Mind/Body Medical Institute at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston.

"Many times, we, as physicians, are surprised about how well a patient will do," said Benson, who was not one of Stacey's doctors. "I believe that medicine has to leave the door open for belief and self-care to add to the awesome contribution to healing that drugs and surgery can do."

During her six months of treatment, Stacey felt nauseous and feverish and needed several blood transfusions because of her dangerously low blood count. Her last round of chemo was halted because she was too sick.

Through it all, she managed to joke about losing her hair.

"I never really thought of dying," said Stacey, now 17.

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# Kids advocate for other children and themselves

Every child wants a home," says 12-year-old Cronetta. "So help the children in the world because everybody needs a parent."

Cronetta and her brother Robert, age 10 are spokespeople for children in foster care who are waiting for adoptive families in Mecklenburg neighborhoods. They know what it feels like to be waiting - they are waiting for parents to adopt them.

"Cronetta is insightful, engaging, and outgoing - she has a strong sense



Cronetta and Robert are two of many children waiting to be adopted in Mecklenburg County.

of responsibility, appreciates guidance, and has a positive outlook on life," says long-time friend Evelyn Dillard. "Robert has an engaging

smile, pleasant personality and has a special interest in music." Both Cronetta and Robert sing

in the church choir together. "I love my brother, he's always been part of my life," states Cronetta. "I want to be adopted into the same family with Robert."

If you are interested in finding out more about Cronetta and Robert or other children awaiting adoption, call Mecklenburg County Department of Social Services at 704-336-KIDS (5437).



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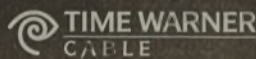
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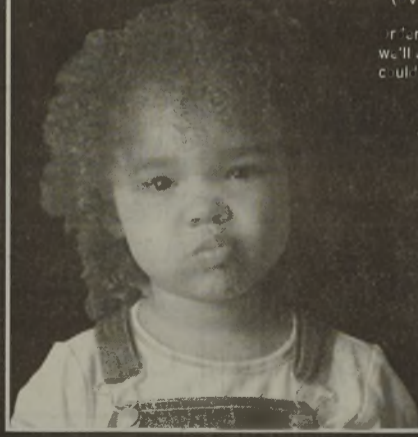
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