

an act of love

Child Gives Pennies to Chapel

There's an expression about being "as happy as a kid in a candy store."

And there's another one that says nothing is really yours until you give it away.

Both of those thoughts, in their own way, have taken on special meaning at the Medical Center because of an act of love and generosity of a 3-year-old Cherokee Indian girl from western North Carolina.

The child is Ronda Lynn Bradley, who first came to Duke more than two and a half years ago when she was not quite a year old. She carried a heavy, black birthmark on her face that covered the entire upper left portion, and her mother sought the aid of Duke plastic surgeons.

The doctors were encouraging and told Mrs. Lucinda Jane Bradley to bring her daughter back when she could be bottle-fed and could be admitted to the hospital for surgery.

The return visit took place just under two years ago. Ronda was admitted for surgery, and the first night she was here, her mother and grandmother were sitting in the lobby when a hospital security officer, Alvin Nichols, walked by.

Mr. Nichols recognized the two women as Cherokee Indians because he and his wife had spent several of their vacations near the Cherokee reservation in the mountains. He began talking with them and learned about Ronda.

Mr. Nichols also learned that the Bradleys were very low on funds and wouldn't be able to stay in Durham



A CHILD'S SINCERITY -- Three-year-old Ronda Lynn Bradley presents her gift of pennies for the hospital interfaith chapel to Director Dr. Stuart Sessoms.

during Ronda's hospitalization. He went home and talked it over with his wife, and the next evening Mrs. Nichols came to the hospital.

She invited Ronda's mother to come and stay in their home as long as the child was in the hospital. The grandmother returned to Cherokee.

Ronda's operation was successful. The skin at the birthmark site was removed and replaced with a skin graft from her abdomen. She returned again in May of this year, when surgeons fashioned for her an eyebrow from a sliver of her scalp.

Again, Mrs. Bradley stayed at the Nichols home so she could be close to Ronda.

Mr. and Mrs. Nichols had become increasingly fond of Ronda and her family, and over the months Mr. Nichols had begun saving pennies for the little girl. He planned to give them to her when she came to Duke again.

When the Bradleys came back last month for doctors to evaluate Ronda's progress, they stayed with the Nichols family, and the night before she was to

come to the hospital Mr. Nichols gave Ronda her gift of pennies.

He expected her to want to buy a doll, or a toy, or a sackful of candy, and he wasn't prepared for her reaction.

"Instead of wanting to spend the money," Nichols recalled, "she said she wanted to give it to the 'church' at the hospital." The "church" is the new interfaith chapel soon to be opened near the main lobby.

That simple declaration of generosity called for a special ceremony.

In the absence of Chaplain Wesley Aitken, Dr. Stuart Sessoms, director of the hospital, happily agreed to accept Ronda's gift on behalf of the chaplain, the hospital and the "church."

As a large crowd gathered in the corridor outside the chapel, Ronda, who was dressed in Cherokee costume, ceremoniously poured her small treasure into Dr. Sessoms' cupped hands.

A child, reflecting a generosity beyond her years, had declined to buy something for herself and instead passed her small gift on to others.



NICHOLS