



This year's Thon extra special for 6-year-old State College girl

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She sits tall and vivacious on the shoulders of a student, and from the electric grin on her face to the sparkle of her big blue eyes, she looks as if she has just unwrapped her dream doll house on Christmas morning.

But no, it is not Christmas, a birthday, or even the perfect present making this child so elated. She is at Penn State's THON for the fifth time, and this weekend's 46-hour dance marathon meant so much more to the State College family than it ever has before.

Isabella Messina, the 6-year old daughter of Pat and Renee, and sister to little brother Jack, is the reason why.

This weekend marked the 36th anniversary of THON, the largest student-run philanthropy in the world that strives to assist the Four Diamonds families who have children receiving treatment for pediatric cancer at the Penn State Medical Center in Hershey. THON weekend is the culmination of a year of work toward helping these families. All that work paid off when a record \$6,615,318.04 was unveiled yesterday afternoon to more than 700 dancers, 200 families, and a Bryce Jordan Center littered with students.

The Messinas are just one of the 2000 families that have been helped by the fund since 1972, and their involvement started five years ago.

On March 27, 2003, when Isabella was only 20 months old, she was diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukemia. She was treated in the Hershey Medical Center for eight months, and received an early remission, meaning all signs and symptoms of her leukemia disappeared, and there were no abnormal cells in her blood. Despite this, and her positive attitude, her mother never felt like she could be off of her guard.

“It never goes away,” Messina said. “Not a day went by that I didn't look over her skin for bruising or question fatigue or aches and pains in depth. Isabella grew very tired of it and used to try to reassure me that she was fine and could explain any bruises she had.”

All throughout this time, Isabella was seeing doctors to have her blood count checked—and things started to look up as she entered her fourth year of remission. A fifth year would classify her as cured.

Last November, however, at a routine checkup, her pathologist was worried about some atypical cells in her blood counts, and urged the family to get the labs redone. The family planned to have the labs redone within two weeks but “didn't make it that far.”

Two days after the check up, Isabella complained of pain in her legs at night, a symptom of Leukemia. She was rushed to Hershey Medical Center where she was diagnosed with Acute Lymphocytic Leukemia.

“It was our worst fear,” Messina said.

Because of everything that has happened in the last four months, the THON experience this year has been different for the family.

Annual THON activities include a family picnic in Hershey in September, Harvest Day at Harner's Farm in October, the THON 5K in November, the family carnival in December and the

THON Hoops basketball game in January. Usually, the Messinas never miss any activities, but, “with the current circumstances, we only made it to Harvest Day this year,” Messina said.

The big event, as everyone knows however, is THON weekend.

“We were fearful that we might not be able to attend THON this year due to her bone marrow transplant, but we just found out it is scheduled in March,” Messina said.

The bone marrow transplant will impact more than Isabella. Despite the high odds, her little brother Jack is a perfect match for her. She will have to be hospitalized for a month after her transplant, and for the next three months she is required to stay within 15 minutes of the hospital.

Because the family lives in State College, and they want to maintain “as much normalcy as possible,” one of the parents will live in Hershey with Isabella, while the other will stay in the area with Jack.

“I am not sure how it is going to work out,” Messina said, “but we will make do as best we can.”

The Messinas receive a lot of help from the Four Diamonds Fund. They have been given medications that insurance was not able to cover, assistance with meal passes at the hospital while Isabella was inpatient, and scores of gas vouchers for the 200-mile round trip to the Hershey Medical Center. Also a blessing for the family was a clinic that opened in State College, which helped cut down on the trips. During Isabella’s four years of remission almost all of her appointments were able to be held locally.

As every THON passes, the two children begin to grasp a little bit more about their situation.

“It is very different this time around,” Messina said. “We have Jack now to worry about too. More importantly though, is that Isabella is now 6, and everything required some explanation. The hospitalizations, medicines, hair loss, and why she could no longer attend school.”

It is a lot for a child to comprehend.

“She has been incredible,” Messina said. “She now understands much of what is going on and why. I try to explain what I can, and feel she needs to know in terms that she can understand.”

The organization that dances for Isabella is the Student Athlete Advisory Board (SAAB), and every year, the dancers cannot get enough her.

“She is such a sweet kid,” said David Gray, an alumni and one of the SAAB dancers from last year. “She was so active herself, that it was hard for me to ever feel tired.”

The Messinas got ready for the big weekend with a pre-THON “Thanksgiving” dinner, which happened two weeks ago. It is a chance for them to get acquainted with the dancers, and for the dancers to get acquainted with the children.

Zoey Bouchelle, a senior and one of the five dancers from SAAB, developed a quick bond with Isabella.

“She hung onto me all weekend,” Bouchelle said. “Looking down at her during the last few hours was the only thing keeping me on my feet. . . . It was pretty amazing.”

The inspiration that the children and their families give the dancers is definitely a two-way street, however.

“It is such a special weekend for us,” Messina said. “It is quite possibly one of the best times of the year.”