



Bringing A Little Joy (06/18/08)

By JULIA CLINE

The death of a little girl has inspired a program designed to bring joy to other kids during times of illness. And that program will be available soon locally.

Katherine (Kate) Ann Layman, the daughter of Portland native Andy Layman and wife Krista, died in January.

Although she was just 18-months-old, Kate's love of books was the inspiration behind the creation of Kate's Kart, a not-for-profit designed to provide books to hospitalized children. The program, which began at Lutheran Hospital in Fort Wayne, where the Laymans now reside, is coming soon to Jay County Hospital.

Bringing this organization to Andy's hometown, where Kate also happens to be buried, means a lot to the Laymans.

"It allows the community to have some ownership in the program, just by letting them know they are helping out a family and a local charity," said Krista Layman. "Kate and her grandfather are buried here, so it means a lot." Kate was the granddaughter of Cathy Layman and the late Larry Layman.

Portland resident Cathy Layman, Kate's grandmother and Andy's mom will coordinate the program at Jay County Hospital.

"The hospital is very excited about this program," said Cathy. "The plan is we will start the first of August and I will be the one distributing the books"

Cathy will undergo hospital orientation, and then be ready to volunteer her services, which even include reading the books to the children herself. "I think this is just a wonderful thing they are doing for the children," said Betty Krieg, Director of Volunteer Services at Jay County Hospital. "I'm so glad Cathy got in touch with us and that we are able to bring this to our hospital."

Kate Layman, enjoyed books throughout the 150 days she was hospitalized. Although her life was cut short due to heart problems, she was able to find joy in many, many things.

"We could tell how much she liked books by the smile on her face ... She was developmentally delayed, so did not have a lot of body strength, but she was able to read the books," said Krista. Even with her physical ailments, she was able to turn the pages and pull the flaps.

"She couldn't crawl or walk, so this was something she could do. She loved people, so having people read to her was a way for her to interact with them," Krista said.

Having the books in the hospital was not only a benefit for Kate, it helped Krista, her husband Andy, and their son, Seth, 4. "The days were very long. The books gave us something new to do and it was something different and was a little ray of sunshine," said Krista. "It's funny how the simple things in life bring you joy."

After many operations, including four open-heart surgeries, Kate passed away on January 15, 2008. "We wanted to do something with the memorial money that we had gotten, so we got to thinking," said Krista. What started off slowly grew quickly with the help of some friends and a radio competition.

Shannon McClure, a Fort Wayne resident and friend of a friend of the Laymans, kick-started the growth of Kate's Kart after becoming one of those selected to participate in a program modeled after Oprah Winfrey's "Big Give" television show.

McClure was given \$100 and 10 days to pick a charity-of-choice to help. She picked Kate's Kart after talking with a co-worker who was friends with the Laymans.

McClure was driving to work while listening to Fort Wayne radio station 95.1 when the

station announced a competition that give \$100 to each of the contestants for them to use in whatever charitable way they chose.

McClure couldn't contain her excitement and quickly started telling co-workers about her options. One of those co-workers, Dalen Tranbarger, had had dinner with the Laymans the night before and told her about the Kate's Kart concept. Tranbarger's wife Laura was designing the organization's website.

McClure then decided Kate's Kart is where she wanted her \$100 to go.

Shannon had 10 days to see what she could do with her money. She e-mailed the staff of Fort Wayne Community Schools to see what they would be willing help with. They immediately started planning an event. What Krista had only imagined of as simply filling a cart, would soon grow immensely.

"Everything has fallen into place for this," said Krista. "We haven't had one stumbling block. People give or donate everything. Everything has just been laid perfectly in place."

That is a perfect description for a May 3 "Fill the U-Haul" event. U-Haul donated a U-Haul, which Krista had once imagined as only being one single cart. A Party Apart donated a tent while Paint the Town Graphics donated a banner including a logo designed by the Laymans' son Seth.

"Seth wanted to help any way he could, so he was able to design the logo," said Krista.

The May 3 event turned out to be a great success. People steadily came throughout the day to make donations of 5,517 books, \$2,771 in cash, \$210 in gift cards, and \$817 other donations.

Shannon's \$100 was used on purchasing plastic tubs, that were quickly filled with children's books. Since then, Krista has seen the influx of interest and the books keep rolling in. "I know about 15 other families throughout the U.S. that have children with heart problems and they have put links to our website on their websites and blogs," said Krista. Recently the Layman's received a check for \$100 from a man in Texas, who they had never met. "About three or four times a week we get checks from strangers, who just want to help. I can't believe it."

Kate's Kart is still receiving donations from people the family knows as well, including thousands of books from the Canterbury schools in Fort Wayne.

Kate's Kart is up and rolling. On June 4 Kate's Kart, and its volunteers, passed out 36 books at Lutheran Hospital in Fort Wayne.

Kate's Kart is in the process of being started at other Indiana hospitals during the summer, but when asked where the program will be in 10 years, Krista responded, "That scares me. I have no idea."

At the pace it is going, it has potential to be anything they want it to be in a decade from now. Locally, it is taking off. West Walnut Church of Christ in Portland is doing Kate's Kart as its vacation Bible school mission. "It's unbelievable. The kids are bringing in their birthday and allowance money," said Krista. "Normally they raise about \$40 from the children, they are already at \$200."

An idea generated in the midst of grief has brought the family comfort and a great reminder of their daughter. "It still lets me be a mom to Kate," said Krista. "She's in heaven now, but it's letting me continue to have a role in her life."