

Paying it forward



FORMER CANCER PATIENT JOINS RANKS OF HOSPITAL'S DONORS, VOLUNTEERS



Sometimes the youngest patients teach us the most important life lessons. Take, for example, Grace Richerson, who was diagnosed with cancer at age 3. Now an active and healthy 7-year-old, she is giving back to the hospital where she was treated, to help sick kids going through similar experiences.



Grace Richerson with her dog, Frenchy



Grace with Cardon Children's Medical Center music therapist Angela Wibben

Diagnosed in 2008 with a rare form of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, 3-year-old Grace Richerson had a cancer that was aggressive and fast-moving. She was quickly admitted to the seventh floor pediatric oncology unit at Cardon Children's Medical Center.

"Few things are scarier than being told your child has cancer," recalls mom Sara Richerson. "I immediately thought of the worst-case scenario. But after a few days on the unit I had this incredible sense of relief. The doctors and nurses gave me so much hope, and I knew we were at the right place. I remember thinking, 'Hey, this just might be OK.'"

The healing powers of music, massage and dogs

In addition to standard chemotherapy, complementary therapies played an important part in Grace's treatment.

She made music with the hospital's board-certified music therapists. She experienced the power of the human touch in reducing pain and anxiety and promoting relaxation through massage therapy. Grace also got to know quite a few volunteers—both the two-legged and four-legged varieties—through the hospital's dog-therapy program.

"Grace absolutely loved everything about the dog therapists," Richerson notes. "Even when she couldn't be near the dogs during certain parts of her treatment, she would get so much joy out of just watching them walk by her room."

After nearly two years of treatment, Grace was declared cancer free. Despite her young age, she was incredibly introspective about the experience.

"She saw all of the things everyone did for her at the hospital, and she hasn't forgotten that," Richerson says.

Life after cancer: philanthropist and volunteer

Now a year-and-a-half later, Grace remains a faithful friend to Cardon Children's Medical Center. The nurses who cared for her and the children receiving care on the hospital's seventh floor are never far from her thoughts.

"She has such a big heart, and she wants to make things better for kids going through similar experiences," her mom says.

"About a year ago, Grace asked me where the toys in the Toy Closets came from," Richerson adds. "When we told her they were donated to the hospital, she organized a toy drive and donated about 30 toys and books to the hospital for Childhood Cancer Awareness Month."

Like all patients at Cardon Children's, Grace got to visit the Toy Closet after treatments, tests and procedures. Stocked with donated toys, games and books, the closets help distract patients from their health challenges and give them something fun to focus on and enjoy.

"Treating children with cancer using an integrative medicine approach places the focus on the entire child, rather than just on the cancer."

But helping to fill the Toy Closets was just the start of Grace's philanthropic endeavors. A few months later, she decorated a Christmas tree with the popular Beanie Babies stuffed animals and delivered it to the hospital.

"The children got to keep the Beanie Babies," Richerson says. "It was Grace's gift to them."

So what's next for Grace? She and her pooch, Frenchy, are now in training to be certified as dog-therapy volunteers.

"She wants to go to the hospital and cheer up other kids with cancer the same way the dog-therapy volunteers cheered her up," Richerson notes with pride.

Aware that her daughter has an understanding of life and the world far beyond her years, Richerson fittingly describes Grace as "an old soul."

"Hope goes out the window when you're told your child has cancer," says Richerson. "Cardon Children's gave us hope and gave Grace her health. Now we're paying it forward in order to help other families."



[Watch a video on how integrative therapies made a difference in Grace's cancer journey.](#)

STARS OF THE SEASON SUPPORTS INTEGRATIVE CANCER CARE

Integrative therapies such as those that played such a critical part in Grace Richerson's treatment are important components of the care delivered to patients at Banner Children's.

Integrative medicine combines standard medical therapies with safe and effective complementary therapies into one comprehensive treatment plan. So an oncologist may include orders for a patient to have yoga, massage and music therapy along with chemotherapy, surgery or radiation.

"Treating children with cancer using an integrative medicine approach places the focus on the entire child, rather than just on the cancer," says Nicolas Peters, MD, pediatric hematologist-oncologist at Cardon Children's Medical Center.

Stars of the Season

Last year's Stars of the Season fundraising gala raised over \$500,000 to enhance and expand integrative cancer care at Cardon Children's. Grace Richerson was one of the event's Star honorees.

The 2015 event, set for Oct. 24, will help fund a permanent home within Cardon Children's for the music therapy program.



[Learn more about Stars of the Season](#)