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Special gift for girl comes from unlikely place

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I met Brad Hentges for the first and likely last time Wednesday at a gas station off the U.S. 41 Richmond Street exit.

His phone call alert gave me 15 minutes; he'd be in the red Wisconsin Badgers jacket. I'd be in the dirty white car.

Hentges, who teaches in the vocational cabinetry shop at the Green Bay Correctional Institution, was headed to Madison, but first he wanted to give me something to pass along to Hailey Meltz, a 2-year-old Appleton girl with an inoperable brain tumor who was featured in The Post-Crescent Oct. 21.

It was a gift, handcrafted from inmate No. 134428, Daniel Northup.

Northup was sentenced November 2005 in Marathon County for substantial battery-intend bodily harm, felon possessing a firearm and operating a vehicle while under the influence, according to state court records.

Early this month, I received a letter from Northup, who said he was so moved after reading Hailey's story, he felt compelled to make something for Hailey in hopes it might bring a smile to her and her family, "even on days when smiles may be hard to come by," he wrote in the letter to her parents that accompanied the gift.

Doing something nice in a correctional institution requires slicing through some serious red tape. So Northup approached vocational instructor Hentges, who got the OK from the administration to create the

one-of-a-kind present, a 3-D night light box. The correctional institution also agreed to pay for the materials and shipping.

So there we stood, two strangers in a parking lot. I was the conduit.

Hentges offered a peek at what was inside the box, and verbally marveled. In his 25 or so years at the prison, he'd never had a prisoner do anything so selfless, he said.

Surrounding by crumpled newspapers laid a handcrafted wooden cabinet about a foot tall. It was made of tiger maple. Behind a piece of clear plexiglass stood an angel who Northup based on a watercolor painting by artist Amy Brown titled "Guardian Angel." A small fluorescent bulb illuminated the angel who held a lantern to light the way.

"I figured since Hailey gets sick at times from her treatment, she may get up at night and the light box may help her to see better if she does," wrote Northup who also included a special note for Hailey:

"Hello Hailey.

"I read about you in the newspaper. And I thought, what a brave little girl. So I wanted to make you something special. I made you a guardian angel night box, in case you have to get up at night. It will help you see better if you do. Hope you like it. Keep being brave and get better."

The Meltz family is touched Northup took the time, effort and energy to do this for Hailey.

"Not only the gesture itself but the final product is pretty cool," Brian said Thursday. "It brought a smile to our face and to Hailey's for at least a couple seconds. ...

"We would really appreciate it if you could pass along our gratitude to Dan and let him know how much we respect and appreciate what he did and wish him a very Merry Christmas for us."

As for Hailey, her condition remains about the same. Although her weight still is not where it needs to be, Brian said the tumor has not grown and the family continues her chemotherapy regimen.

"We are plugging away on the fundraising front as well and funneling money to the PLGA (Pediatric Low-Grade Astrocytoma) Foundation to help fund a multi-institutional research program dedicated to finding a cure for Hailey's tumor type.

"We have not raised nearly enough money yet, but we are picking up some steam and hoping to keep growing our efforts."

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