



Push for research, cures after Methuen girl is diagnosed with brain tumor

By Jill Harmacinski
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METHUEN — In the picture on the kitchen wall, Caroline Hamilton is one of three small children, sitting on a beach, their backs to the camera, calmly watching the ocean.

That moment, captured on a Florida beach last year, "was the end of a perfect week in the midst of all this chaos," said Sarah (Previte) Hamilton, Caroline's mom.

Caroline Hamilton, 7, a first-grader with a great smile, has a plum-sized tumor lodged in her brain. The tumor is incurable and inoperable, and the child — for now — must undergo chemotherapy treatments to keep the tumor from growing.

The treatments, developed 25 years ago, are the child's best option to stay alive. But the Hamilton family finds that unacceptable. They are now pushing to find kinder and more effective treatments for children with brain tumors. Current options are akin to the era of "electric typewriters and Slimline phones on the kitchen wall," her mom said.

"We are giving her 1984's best," Sarah said. "We can do better for our children."

Last year, just two weeks after Caroline was diagnosed, the Dana-Farber Cancer Research Institute in Boston launched a special program to study childhood brain tumors. The program is the first of its kind committed to this type of tumor, medically categorized as a pediatric low-grade astrocytoma.

When the Hamiltons heard about the new program, they knew they had to get involved.

"We cannot stand on the sidelines. We must be involved in the fight," said Sarah.

Last year, the Hamiltons mobilized 79 Jimmy Fund walkers and raised nearly \$50,000 for research. This year, they hope Team Chickaroo can do even better, all in the name of Caroline, who, as a baby, was affectionately nicknamed "Chickaroo" by her dad. A golf tournament is scheduled next month at Hickory Hill in Methuen. Sponsors are still needed.

Lives changed forever

Caroline's brain tumor was first diagnosed in early 2007, after the nurse at St. Michael School in North Andover, Linda Sullivan, noticed the girl struggled with a portion of her kindergarten vision test. Sarah and her husband, Rick, were somewhat concerned, as Caroline never complained about her vision and her teachers never mentioned any problems, either.

Then, in mid-April, as the family was vacationing in Longboat Key, Fla., Rick and Sarah both noticed a "jerking movement" in Caroline's left eye. Concerned, the couple vowed to have the problem checked out during an ophthalmology exam scheduled when they returned home.

But the ophthalmologist said Caroline's eyes were both healthy. The problem instead was blamed on a possible brain lesion.

Two long days later, Caroline underwent her first MRI at Children's Hospital's satellite center in Waltham. Immediately after the exam, Rick and Sarah were led to a conference room and handed a cell phone. A pediatrician told them Caroline, a feisty brunette who hates Band-Aids and thermometers, had a pediatric brain tumor.

Those words, at that very moment, changed their lives forever, Sarah said.

Rick, a National Guard major, who just days before the diagnosis returned from Iraq, fought back tears as he recalled learning of the tumor. A Lawrence native, Hamilton has worked as both a probation officer and county jail security director and overcome a variety of obstacles and enemies. But he admitted, nothing prepares you for a fight with a brain tumor.

"This has been the worst, the absolute worst," he said.

His wife, a criminal defense attorney now home raising William, 9, Caroline, and Aidan, 4, also was floored.

"I slept better with my husband in Iraq ... I knew he was a capable, competent soldier and that he'd be fine," said Sarah, who also grew up in Lawrence.

She also was fraught with worry, wondering if something she'd done or ate while pregnant or as a mother, affected Caroline's health.

"I was so careful not to even take an aspirin," she said. "Now, I'm putting stranger's blood into her."

Still happy-go-lucky

Sarah had an uncle who, years ago, died from a brain tumor, an adult tumor that was very different from Caroline's. Specialists now treating Caroline said there's no way to pinpoint what caused the tumor, however.

Over the past year, the couple have found themselves immersed in a new world, complete with neurologists and oncologists. All the while, Caroline has been a great sport, submitting to MRI and CT scans without complaint or sedation, her parents said.

On June 6, 2007, Caroline started her first round of chemotherapy, despite the treatment being "outdated and antiquated," Sarah said.

She continues those treatments today, supplemented by both blood and platelet transfusions to keep her body

strong. She worries that she's literally poisoning her daughter to help her get better. And there's also the long-term effect the treatments may have on her bone marrow. There's also day-to-day hurdles, such as the loss of appetite and high risk of infection.

"If she ends up getting a fever, it's an automatic trip to the hospital," Sarah said. Sometimes, it even means Caroline has to be admitted overnight.

The Hamiltons also subscribe to alternative treatments, taking Caroline to acupuncture sessions and Reiki massage. She's also working closely with a Utah-based nutritionist who developed a diet just for the girl.

"Anything we can do, we do," Sarah said.

Since Caroline was diagnosed, Sarah said she's met many people whose lives have been touched by tumors. "Everyone has a brain tumor story," she said.

Massachusetts Sen. Edward Kennedy's recent glioma diagnosis and surgery further shined the spotlight on brain tumors. Sarah noted the senior senator has a very different tumor than her daughter. She easily explains the difference between the tumors and, with a smile, explained she'd be happy to do this on television.

"I'll go on "Oprah" and talk about this," she said.

Despite what she's endured already, Caroline remains a bubbly, happy-go-lucky child who enjoys playing in the garden and writing her name in colored chalk in the driveway.

She likes art and computer class, but admits she's psyched school's about to end. She is learning to play violin and will soon be featured in a fundraising concert.

She refers to the tumor as "that thing in my head."

The Hamiltons this summer will visit Camp Sunshine, a Casco, Maine, retreat for children with life-threatening illnesses and their families. The family is going during a week set aside for children with brain tumors.

When Caroline was first diagnosed, Sarah said the family tried to handle the matter privately. But slowly as the word got out, they found support in all kinds of places. They both can't say enough about their extended family at St. Michael Church. The parishioners have done everything from cook the Hamiltons fabulous meals to including them in their daily prayers.

"It's incredible," Sarah said. "Because you really do feel the power of those prayers."

Married for 10 years now, the Hamiltons admit having a child with an illness is very stressful.

"But our drive, obviously as parents, is to do the best for our children. I want to see Caroline grow up. I want to see her go to high school and college and have her own children," Rick said.

Sarah couldn't agree more.

"We are in this together," she said. "I wouldn't want to go through this with anyone else."

Staff reporter Jill

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Join Team Chickaroo

Team Chickaroo is always looking for new members to help them in the battle for better research and treatment for pediatric brain tumors. For more information on Caroline, her family and fundraising efforts, check out www.chickaroo.org.

"Chickaroos are brave and strong. Chickaroos are tough. Chickaroos are winners," reads the site.

The first Chickaroo Classic golf tournament is set for July 14 at Hickory Hill in Methuen. Sponsors are still needed.

About PLGAs

r Pediatric low-grade astrocytomas are the most common form of childhood brain tumors. They also are the least researched.

r More than 20,000 children in the United States have pediatric low-grade astrocytomas today. More than 1,000 new pediatric cases are diagnosed each year.

r The tumors are called low grade because they are slow growing. But the tumor can be life-threatening if the growth is not stopped.

r If surgery is not an option, chemotherapy and radiation are used to slow the tumor's growth.

r By accelerating research and combining scientific advances, scientists and doctors believe more effective therapies can be found.

r The biggest obstacle to research is lack of funding.

Source: PLGA Foundation, www.fightplga.org

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