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Sunday, April 3, 2005

News: Features

Teens' Dream Team supports research for brain tumors

By Norma B. Dennis

Jamestown, NC - Erica Gunter of Jamestown and Emma Peebles and Dana Smith of Greensboro look like typical teenagers, but each has experienced the trauma of dealing with life-threatening brain tumors. The three meet in a brain tumor support group for teens and soon became friends.

Their goal now is to help others by raising funds for brain tumor research to find cures and medicine that offer fewer side effects.

For the second year in a row, the girls, along with Kate Shipman of Chapel Hill, their families and friends, and the family and friends of 2-year old Harley Reece of Burlington, will participate in the Angels Among Us 5K and Family Funwalk April 24 at Duke University in Durham. The Dream Team, as they call themselves, will



Brain tumor survivors, Emma Peebles, Erica Gunter and Dana Smith, show their enthusiasm for the Hoop of Dreams Basketball Academy, as they each hold a basketball on the steps of Gunter's home in Jamestown. (Photo/Norma B. Dennis)



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walk through the Sarah P. Duke Gardens, a distance of between two to three miles.

"It is pretty exhausting," Erica said.

But the girls and their supporters feel the results are worth the effort. Last year, the Dream Team raised \$9,355.50 placing them among the top 10 Angels Among Us fund-raisers.

This year they hope to raise even more. They already have held two yard sales, which included the sale of Angel crafts, where they raised \$1,500. They have also mailed letters to family members, friends and local businesses, seeking donations.

"We try to empathize in the letter that Duke is world renown for its treatment of brain tumors," Erica's mother, Karen Gunter, said.

"In fact, it is one of the leading hospitals for the treatment of brain tumors," Terrie Brown, Dana's mother added.

Two Duke employees, Cary Harrison, whose mother died of a brain tumor, and Terry Rose, who lost his daughter to a brain tumor, started Angels Among Us in 1994. The first year \$32,350 was raised from a 5K run held in Durham. The current event features not only the 5K run and family funwalk, but also entertainment, refreshments and other hands-on activities. Last year supporters raised over \$362,000.

Erica, age 15 and a student at Ragsdale High School, was first diagnosed with a brain tumor at age 10 while on a family vacation. She underwent emergency surgery at Children's Hospital at Virginia Beach and a second surgery at Duke Hospital. She then faced six weeks of radiation and 10 months of chemotherapy. Erica is diabetic, which made her treatment harder to manage.

Sixteen-year-old Emma, a student at Grimsley High School, was 7 when her tumor was discovered. She was airlifted from Greensboro to Duke Hospital only to learn her tumor could not be removed surgically.

"The doctors thought it was one kind, but found it was another," Emma's mother, Faith Crosby, said. "It was located in the hypothalamus."

Emma underwent 21 months of chemotherapy, which shrank the tumor. She has been stable for

eight years.

Dana, 15 and a student at Southeast High School, was eight when her tumor was discovered. Her pediatrician had been treating Dana unsuccessfully with antibiotics for earaches.

"We decided to take Dana to a neurologist," her mother, Terrie Brown, said. "After sending Dana for an MRI to confirm her suspicion, she told us she knew Dana had a tumor by looking at her eyes. She called us the night of the MRI and told us to be at Duke the next morning."

"Mom tried to explain to me why we were going to Duke, but I did not understand the seriousness of it," Dana said.

Following an eight-hour surgery, Dana had six weeks of radiation and a year of chemotherapy. The chemo affected her hearing and she has to wear hearing aides.

There are many long-term side affects from the medications the girls have to take to keep them alive. General side effects can include stunted growth, short-term memory loss, hormonal imbalance and the reduction of eye-hand coordination.

"That is why it is so important that we find a cure," Brown said.

The three friends have little time to feel sorry for themselves, however. Each has maintained her grade level in school in spite of time missed. They have recently joined a basketball program at Duke called Hoop Dreams Basketball Academy. Coached by Mike Zeillmann, the team is geared for youths with life-threatening illnesses.

The girls and their mothers carpool to Duke each Saturday so the girls can play basketball, then the group enjoys lunch together after practice.

"It is something to look forward to each week," Emma said. "I enjoy playing sports."

Brown says the activity does much more than help players with eye-hand coordination. "It affects their social skills with others their own age," she said. "They are accepted by their peers in this group."

"Gym class for me is basically a nightmare," Erica

added. "But in Hoop Dreams you feel like the top athlete."

Because they are some of the first participants in the basketball program, the girls may have the opportunity to be interviewed by "60 Minutes" or "People Magazine." But their current focus is the upcoming Angels Among Us Walk.

The yearly walk is something the girls and their families plan to continue.

"But we hope they find a cure for brain tumors," Brown said. "Then we won't have to walk."

To help Erica, Emma and Dana raise money for the Duke Brain Tumor Program, make checks payable to Duke - 04BT and earmark them for the Dream Team. Mail to Duke Comprehensive Cancer Center, "Angels" DUMC 3828, Durham, NC 27710 or to Karen Gunter, 214 Cloverbrook, Jamestown, NC 27282.

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