

Cancer Awareness

McLeod Family Finds Support Through Their Child's Cancer Journey at Wellness Place

By: Tara Seymour

A cancer diagnosis can shake your world like nothing else—it can change a life forever. That's exactly what happened to Carolyn McLeod and her husband Mike, two years ago when their five-year-old son Sam was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia (ALL).

The diagnosis left their family with unsettling thoughts, fears and questions. Carolyn and Mike refused to give up hope, even through their disbelief. With two young children and distress taking over their family, they knew they must find a way to bring peace and understanding during this time.



Carolyn, Grace, Sam and Mike McLeod

With their calendars filling up with endless doctor's appointments, tests, medical procedures and hospital visits, Carolyn and Mike knew it was a matter of time until Sam and their two-year-old daughter Grace, would feel the emotional affects from cancer.

"It really has been tearing me apart to watch Sam go through so much while fighting this awful disease," said Carolyn. "But, it is just as heart-wrenching to see my healthy child experience all that she has."

With no real way of being able to understand just how this diagnosis was impacting their children, the McLeod's searched for help. Through small talk and conversations, Carolyn and Mike found the hope they were seeking—Wellness Place. Wellness Place is a cancer counseling, support and education center located in Palatine right in the heart of the McLeod's neighborhood.



Wellness Place in Palatine

At Wellness Place, the entire McLeod family found the support they needed in their own way at no charge. Through separate and personalized methods Carolyn, Mike, Sam and Grace were each able to get the extra support they prayed for.

Carolyn and Mike were directed to parent support groups while Sam and Grace were led to Lori Mackey, an Art Therapist and Child and Adolescent Specialist at Wellness Place.

"A cancer diagnosis is often very confusing and overwhelming for children," said Lori. "They may not know how to respond or what they should be feeling. Often there are many emotions happening at once and it becomes difficult to find the right words to explain how and what they are feeling. Through art therapy and medical play I help them address, confront and work through their concerns."

With the guidance from the Wellness Place team and the use of the *Foglia Children, Teen and Family Center*, Sam and Grace were able to utilize a combination of methods to help them better understand cancer. Through medical play, art therapy and discussion, Sam and Grace were able to begin the process of connecting their emotions to their individual cancer experience.

"Medical play is a way for children to learn through exploration and age appropriate education," said Lori. "We have cancer related medical equipment set up for children in an environment playroom we call *The Tree House* that welcomes discovery and child centered play. It's a way to offer children and adolescents a sense of control while encouraging self-expression and self-exploration."

The Foglia Center resides in the lower level of Wellness Place and was developed to create a safe space for children and teenagers who need an outlet for their emotions during a cancer experience.



Wellness Place Playroom

To help inspire this connection, Wellness Place created a vast playroom surrounded by art. With a tree of inspiration capturing the essence of the room, it is a place of trust, growth and understanding.

The center offers medical play equipment including: a hospital bed, pediatric IV pole, x-ray viewer, needle-free syringes, thermometers, gowns, gloves, masks, blood pressure cuffs and a specially outfitted medical doll for children.



Carolyn, Sam and Grace

"The medical doll is designed to be used for education and procedure preparation," said Lori. "The doll is gender neutral and allows for children and teens to learn about their illness and procedures and 'play out their experiences'."

The medical doll is often very special to children because it has interchangeable facial expressions which can be matched to the experience, emotion or physical feeling

happening to the child. There are other interchangeable "skins" which can help to demonstrate procedures such as a spinal tap or bone marrow aspiration. They also assist when explaining brain tumors, PICC lines and ports which can be fitted to the doll as appropriate to the situation. It even has a wig, which can be removed to discuss hair loss.

The Foglia Center was created to help children like Sam and Grace cope and explore their fears, and it is what helped the McLeod's work through their own anxieties.

Sam, who also has Down Syndrome, struggled with grasping his cancer diagnosis. Because of his cognitive differences, Sam has trouble expressing himself verbally. Through art and play, he began to better understand what was happening inside his body. He became more comfortable with his cancer, the doctors and procedures.



Grace and Lori

Grace, who enjoys using dolls for medical play, utilized the Foglia Center to add meaning to her brother's leukemia. "She has become more understanding and less jealous of the attention Sam is receiving because of his cancer diagnosis," said Carolyn. "She has become more comfortable with what she is seeing Sam endure and has begun to talk more about his diagnosis."

Through Wellness Place, the McLeod's have found the support and education they were seeking. "Sam and Grace have taken many things, we believe, from Wellness Place and incorporated them into their daily lives," said Carolyn. "Some of these are the ability to be more compassionate, more understanding and more patient with others."

For more information about programs at Wellness Place, visit www.wellnessplace.org or call 847.221.2400.