

Little Wishes Come True

By Edward Carpenter



Barbara Riles

Pediatric nurse Laura Euphrat '89 grants the wishes of seriously ill children.

It's Monday morning and the sun is coming up on San Francisco. Laura Euphrat '89 is walking the corridors of California Pacific Medical Center singing, rapping, and tap dancing her way past patients' rooms. Forget the Monday blues.

Euphrat's energy is irresistible. She cruises the pediatric nurses' stations to recruit doctors and fellow nurses to help her as she delivers presents to the hospital's most seriously ill children.

She's been up since 5 a.m., wrapping those gifts and writing thank you notes to donors, then driving her own two teenage children to school before heading to the hospital. On this day, Euphrat, a pediatric nurse for 20 years, is delivering gifts to nine patients ranging in age from 8 months to 16 years.

Brandon, the oldest, came into the hospital after one of his lungs spontaneously collapsed. He has been at CPMC for more than a week, most of it spent lying on his back.

Euphrat's "crew" storms Brandon's room, performing a rap version of the Little Wishes song that usually accompanies the presentation of gifts to the children.

"Yo, yo, Little Wishes presents for you,
To make your stay here less gloomy and blue.
You make a wish; we make it come true;
'Cause Little Wishes is here for you!"

Brandon pulls the covers over his head with an embarrassed smile. His mother, vigilant at his side, guffaws. Her laughter spreads through the room as the nurses present him with a new iPod nano that is meant to keep him busy downloading and listening to music rather than dwelling on his treatment.

"This is awesome!" Brandon says.

So awesome, that if, as English poet Christina Rossetti suggested, it's "better by far (to) forget and smile than (to) remember and be sad," then there may be a special place in the hereafter for Euphrat and fellow CPMC nurse Joanne Davantes. Putting hospitalized kids at ease and helping to distract them from their ailments—many of them life-threatening—by brightening their days with small, wished-for presents is the central mission of the

pair's San Anselmo-based nonprofit, Little Wishes.

Founded in 2002 and run entirely on private donations, Little Wishes has fulfilled nearly 4,000 wishes. From its base at CPMC, the nonprofit has proved popular, expanding to the Children's Center at Sutter Medical Center in Sacramento and Sacred Heart Children's Hospital in Spokane, Wa.

"Giving a child the ability to wish for something provides excitement and anticipation, something to look forward to while in the hospital," Euphrat says.

A Giant Inspiration

The inspiration for Little Wishes came to Euphrat and Davantes as they cared for 8-year-old Josh Twitty almost seven years ago. Josh, a San Francisco Giants fan, was diagnosed with an aggressive form of liver cancer. His treatment went from weeks to months and the fall approached, CPMC staff banded together to decorate Josh's room with baseball memorabilia.

"Josh was able to see his favorite team make it to the 2002 World Series just weeks before he passed away, a dream come true for an avid baseball fan," says Euphrat, recalling how watching the games, pinning new memorabilia to the wall, and spontaneous visits from the hospital's staff brought Josh happiness during his difficult hospitalization.

After Josh passed away, Euphrat couldn't help but search for an explanation, a justification, anything, and in doing so she realized the extent to which little gestures of kindness had made a difference to him. "That's when the idea of Little Wishes hit me," Euphrat says.

Receiving a little wish can turn a child's day around and sometimes the entire hospital stay. Not only does it make a child happy, it makes parents happy, and that reverberates to the hospital staff, Euphrat says.

"Tears are not uncommon from parents, especially parents whose child has a chronic or critical illness," says Euphrat. "I think it is because having a child so sick in the hospital is a helpless and frightening feeling."



What the Heart Wants

Yuliya Slivnyak and Sergey Morozov agree. The couple, both 33, discovered two weeks after their daughter Nina's birth that her heart had small holes that allowed blood to move abnormally from one chamber to another, depriving her of oxygen. The family was rushed to CPMC where they were camped out for almost three months before Nina passed away at the end of March.

The family received a number of gifts from Little Wishes during their stay, including a portable stereo for CD lullabies, an infant swing, and dolls.

"We feel like part of the family here," Morozov said during a hospital interview in February.

Hospitalized children can receive a gift every 14 days from Little Wishes. Wishes are reserved for children who have chronic or critical illnesses, or who have been hospitalized for a week or more. Recipients are usually under age 18 and can wish for anything that costs less than \$150.

"It seems like just a little thing, but for the patients and their parents it's huge," says Dr. John Tsukahara, a CPMC pediatric intensive care physician who cares for many of the children that Little Wishes benefits.

Among the other children Euphrat presented gifts to that Monday morning was an 8-month-old girl experiencing seizures, a 13-month-old girl with pneumonia, an 11-year-old girl with leukemia, a 14-year-old girl hospitalized with complications from cerebral palsy, and a 4-year-old with unexplained weight loss.

There were also three boys, ranging in ages from 6 to 14, who had skin cancer, leukemia, and viral encephalitis.

The feeling of accomplishment that comes from seeing the smiles on children's faces as they receive their wish is still hard to describe for Euphrat and Davantes. But, the word they use most often is "fulfillment." To be sure, it can be difficult, exhausting, and emotional work, especially when a child doesn't survive.

A Star Is Born

Teased good-naturedly by her colleagues as the hospital's resident "star," Euphrat recently appeared in a television commercial for Sutter Health group, of which CPMC is a part, and is also featured on the CPMC Web site. If the spotlight seems to come naturally to Euphrat that may be because her first love growing up and into college was acting and singing. But, the patron saint of nurses, St. John of God, must have foreseen her talents as she studied theater at California State University, Chico. Although most of her classes were in the arts, Euphrat couldn't entirely escape studying biology. After bombing her first exam in physiology, she signed up for a study group comprised of nursing students.

"They were all great people and I learned a lot from them," Euphrat says.

Euphrat didn't graduate, but returned home to Marin County where, inspired by her nursing friends, she volunteered in the emergency room at Marin General Hospital and applied to USF. Nursing school wasn't easy, but nursing student friends and study groups pulled her through. "It was a very different environment from the theater arts," Euphrat says.

Thinking back to her personal development while on campus, Euphrat cites awareness of USF's students and faculty to the importance of helping others in need.

"I feel so fortunate that I had the opportunity to have that as part of my educational foundation," she says. "To have the tools to bring a smile, a laugh, or a tiny bit of comfort to a child for even one day makes it all worth it." **USF**

A Wish Granted: Laura Euphrat '89 presents Denise Farrar, 15, with her wish of a digital camera.

For more information about Little Wishes, visit www.littlewishes.org.