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Relay for Life: Thanksgiving holds special meaning for Reno family

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When Tracy Sandford saw her fingerprints left behind as bruises when she changed her 2-year-old son Josh's diaper, she didn't know what to make of it. When he became jaundiced and so bloated he waddled when he walked, she rushed him to the hospital. Was it a reaction to antibiotics he was on for a sinus infection? Was it another illness? She got her answer that day: Her son had leukemia.

"Our lives just turned upside down," she said. "I remember that my knees just buckled when they told me. Kids don't get cancer. Kids shouldn't get cancer."

The diagnosis of acute lymphoblastic leukemia was the start of a three-year battle with the disease that affected the whole family, including Josh's father, Travis, and older sister, Lyndsey. Josh, now 8 and a second-grader at Phillips Elementary, received regular chemotherapy treatments until the age of 5 and due to his weakened immune system, missed out on much of his early childhood.



The Sandford family — Travis, Tracy, Josh and Lyndsey poses this week at their Reno home. Josh, now 8, recovered from leukemia he was diagnosed with at the age of 2.

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"We tried not to put him in a bubble but he had so many restrictions," said Sandford, of Reno. "He couldn't go play in the mud outside or be around birds and play in the creek. He had to start kindergarten a year late. It was just constant worry."

There was frequent treatment and testing, and the Sandfords feared Lyndsey, now 13, would feel forgotten. They signed her up for the SuperSibs! program, a national program, which regularly sent encouraging letters and packages, and made an effort to include her in the family efforts to restore Josh's health. Explanations were made when Josh lost his hair and when he grew larger from steroids. When the family needed to give him chemotherapy at home through an IV, Lindsey held the tube.

"It kept her involved," said Sandford. "Now they fight like cats and dogs, but she watches out for him."

Josh's last week of chemotherapy was the week of Thanksgiving, an anniversary the family marks every year on the holiday. And on every other day of the year, the young cancer survivor can be found playing outside, trying new sports and just being a normal child, his mother said.

"Always before it was, 'No, you can't do that,' and now he loves to explore," she said. "He can play in the mud, and it's all right. We live in the country and he can be a country boy now."

His son can usually be found on his motorcycle or four-wheeler, said Travis Sandford.

"He's usually on one of those," he said. "He's very active."

Josh doesn't remember much from his days of cancer and treatment although he knows he was sick. It doesn't affect his life today, Josh said.

"I just like to play," he said.