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FEATURES

Shadow Survivor

Teen faces unique challenge as brother of sick girl

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Hannah Theriot, 6, and her brother Grant, 13, sit together at their backyard fishing pond in Gonzales. Hannah is in remission from a rare immune disorder. Grant, who helped support her during her illness, is part of the SuperSibs! program, a national program for children who have siblings with cancer or other serious illness. **RICHARD ALAN HANNON/THE ADVOCATE**

GONZALES — Grant Theriot, 13, sat patiently at his home recently, while his 6-year-old sister, Hannah, rearranged his bangs and fiddled with his hair.

His patient endurance might not be typical of a teenage brother, but, then, the last few years of his and Hannah's lives have not been typical either.

In 2006, Hannah received a bone-marrow transplant, following chemotherapy, at Duke University Medical Center in Durham, N.C., to treat a rare genetic disorder of the immune system, called chronic mucocutaneous candidiasis (CMC), said her parents, Kevin and Kristen Theriot.

The transplant procedure and a quarantine period afterward meant that the Theriot family — were apart for much of two years, except for

— mom and daughter in North Carolina and dad and son in Gonzales — were apart for much of two years, except for monthly and summertime visits and holidays.

“I was always worried here when I was down here,” Grant said. “I wanted to quit school. I didn't want her to die. I wanted to be with her the whole time.”

The siblings of children who are ill face their own unique pressures.

In 2006, after Hannah's transplant procedure, Grant joined a national organization, SuperSibs!, which is designed to help siblings through difficult times when their sister or brother is seriously ill.

Grant gets special monthly gifts and cards from the organization. He once got a trophy that reads “You're a Great Sibling,” he said.

“Everyone sends the sick child something,” said Hannah and Grant's mother, Kristen, adding that this program makes sure the well ones are not left out.

Inevitably, said their father, Kevin, the sibling of a sick child doesn't get as much of their parents' attention as their brother or sister despite the best intentions.

"We tried, we went out of our way," to provide special times for Grant, Kevin said.

"Some days, we'd go to the skate park in North Carolina," added Grant, who will be in the eighth grade at Central Middle School in Gonzales this year.

SuperSibs!, a nonprofit organization based in Illinois, provides "mailed comfort and care services" to children between the ages of 4 to 18, who are siblings of children with cancer.

The services, which are free of charge, "are intended to bring moments of delight and support to these 'shadow survivors,'" according to the organization's Web site, <http://www.supersibs.org>.

Amanda Goetz, the communications manager for the organization, said that SuperSibs! currently serves 17,000 siblings in the U.S. and Canada.

It initially served a base of 400 children in Illinois and Wisconsin, when it was founded in 2002 by Melanie Goldish, the mother of a pediatric cancer survivor, Goetz said.

A recent study by an independent sibling research board that advises SuperSibs! found that "53 percent of siblings reported symptoms of post traumatic stress and 27 percent qualified for the diagnosis of post traumatic stress disorder," Goetz said.

As SuperSibs! pointed out in a news release, the recently released movie "My Sister's Keeper," a fictional story of the effect of cancer on the lives of the patient, her sister and her parents, highlights how the disease can impact a family.

Kristen Theriot said she might go see the movie.

In one way, she said, watching the movie will be like "reliving my life."

But, she added, "It's also about seeing how far we've come."

Hannah is in remission now, doing well and will be visiting Duke for annual checkups, Kristen said.

This month, Hannah will be starting the first grade at Duplessis Primary in Gonzales.

The whole experience of Hannah's illness and treatment, said her brother Grant, "made me nicer to her and not fuss," like other siblings.

It brought him closer to his little sister, he said.

"I probably have at least three friends that actually know what we've been through," he said.

He said that when his friends come over, Hannah's right there with them, playing video games, watching them ride bikes and riding a skateboard (with Grant holding her hands).

"She loves all my friends," Grant said.

Grant, who was tested as a bone-marrow donor for Hannah, but was not a close enough match, helped his parents take care of Hannah, when she was in North Carolina, his parents said.

"She was thrilled when he got to come, it was like having a friend. They'd color, watch movies," Kristen said.

When Hannah was able to go on short outings — always wearing a surgical mask — Grant would help pack all her medical gear and would alert the family if they happened to be sitting too close to someone who had a cough, Kristen said.

He was "pretty protective," she said.

"We went bowling; she beat us all," Grant said proudly of his little sister.

The family learned about the SuperSibs! program from the head nurse during Hannah's transplant procedure.

Since Hannah's illness was not cancer, the family wrote SuperSibs! for permission for Grant to join.

"They made an exception for Grant," Kristen said.

Recently, at the family's home in Gonzales, Hannah happily showed a guest the family cat — a sleek gray kitten named "Precious."

While Hannah could be around older dogs (who had already gotten their puppy vaccinations) during her illness, she had to avoid cats and cat litter, her mother said.

Another family pet, a little Yorkie mix named Tahoe, peeked over the edge of the kitchen table from Hannah's lap.

Hannah was happy and contented; her brother sat beside her.