

Owen's overcoming cancer obstacles

by CAROL MOORMAN
STAFF WRITER

Mora—You would never know Owen Szoka was sick. This brown-eyed three-year-old boy enjoys playing in his sandbox and on his playground set and jumping on the trampoline. Playing baseball recently, he discovered he's a lefty when hitting the ball.

His strawberry blonde wispy balding head is the only indication something is wrong. Owen was diagnosed with Stage IV Hepatoblastoma, a rare malignant cancer originating in the liver, in December of 2007, and more recently had a brain tumor removed.

He is the grandson of rural New Munich residents Margie and Fred Indieke, "Boppa Freddie" as Owen calls him; son of Cindy (Indieke) and Drew; and brother to Emma and Abby, all of Mora.

A "Get Goin' for Owen" fundraiser will be held starting at 4 p.m., Saturday, May 16, at the Trailview School in Mora. It will include a 5K walk/run. A benefit dinner and silent auction will start at 6 p.m. at the Grand Event Center in Mora.

The Kick-Off to Summer Car Show and Cookoff, in honor of those affected by brain tumors, will be held Saturday, May 30, starting at 9 a.m., in the Sauk River Park in Melrose.

Diagnosis

Owen's medical journey started in December of 2007 when his stomach was rock hard and his breathing labored. He had a baseball-size mass protruding from the right lobe of his liver and many smaller spots of cancer spreading throughout both lungs. A biopsy at Children's Hospital in Minneapolis determined it was hepatoblastoma.

Drew's dad died of colon cancer six years ago, so doctors think this is hereditary and the two cancers are linked.

Cindy and Drew took on a positive attitude, knowing Emma, Abby and Owen were watching their every move.

"This quote sums it up best: 'Life is not about how to survive the storm, but how to dance in the rain.' Many people have to live with cancer, and it really brings out your true character in how you deal with this disease," said Cindy, a Melrose High School graduate.

Four days later Owen started chemotherapy with hopes the cancer cells in his lung would be destroyed and the liver tumor shrunk enough so the surgical team could remove it.

The joys of motherhood took on new meaning for Cindy in May of 2008.

"I always felt very blessed to have three wonderful gifts from God, but until this year I've never realized the full impact of being a mother. I've become a mother who now notices the little things about my children. I also praise, smile, and cheer them on more than I've ever done in their lives," she said.

Owen's chemo lasted about six months, eliminating remaining cancer cells. He was placed on one chemo pill a month, but taken off because of possible liver damage.

In February of 2008 he had a liver resection because of a tumor on the liver. Nodules were removed from his lower left lung in December of 2008 and February of 2009. Complaining of headaches early this year, doctors determined the cancer spread to his brain. On Feb. 25 he had brain surgery to remove a sizable cancerous tumor in his occipital lobe. He has had numerous chemotherapy treatments which will continue until March of 2010.

On May 4 he returned to the Children's Hospital for a CT scan of his whole body, which came back clear. Cindy said they have met amazing families at Children's Hospital and through Hopekids.

"It puts things into perspective and shows us we're not the only ones who have to go through this," said Cindy.

Support

Owen's family appreciates continued prayers for his health, and writes on his Caringbridge website, "He is feeling great."

In fact, he's so full of life, if he didn't have a bald head, people wouldn't even know he has cancer.

"Never in a million years would I ever imagined having a child with cancer. We were so blessed to have such a healthy family and I would thank God every day," said Cindy.

Their prayers are different now.

"We thank God for Owen still being here with us and for our continued strength on our journey," she concluded.



Owen Szoka is pictured with his parents, Cindy and Drew, and sisters Emma and Abby. PHOTO SUBMITTED