

VIEW



Kate's Kart a bright spot for sick kids

Couple turned grief into helping children take their minds off illness.

By Deb Todd

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Nikki Miller recalls the hospitalized child who saw her coming down the hall and screamed in excitement, "It's Kate's Kart!"

"I'm amazed at the number of times we give a book to a child, and the mother will say, 'We donated ... at my child's school (or preschool or church or scout troop), and now we are getting a book back from Kate's Kart,'" said Shirle Schmidt.

Miller and Schmidt are two of more than 70 trained volunteers who visit 10 area hospitals pushing a cart crammed with age-appropriate books that are given to sick and hurting children. This month, just 17 months after Kate's Kart began rolling, the 10,000th book was given to a hospitalized child.

Who is Kate?

Katherine Anne "Kate" Layman was born June 26, 2006, to Andy and Krista and big brother Seth. Within hours she was diagnosed with congenital heart and lung defects — "a broken heart," said the Laymans.

Four open-heart surgeries and five heart catheterizations couldn't repair the damage, and Kate passed away Jan. 15, 2008.

The Laymans since have had another son, Grant Lee Layman, who arrived July 1.

What is Kate's Kart?

The Laymans channelled their grief by establishing the nonprofit Kate's Kart to honor the memory of their daughter, who loved books. With money from memorials and cash and books collected during radio station WJLI 95.1-FM's "Little Give," the first cart began operating in June 2008 at Fort Wayne's Lutheran Hospital.

"Each cart has six shelves," Krista Layman said. "They are divided by shelf with board books, picture books, chapter books, young adult books, activity books ..." Each book is identified with a Kate's Kart sticker designed by Seth.

Kate's Kart gives out 700-900 free books each month.

The books

The Karts are stocked with new books for infants to age 18, with frequent shortages of books for the youngest and the oldest.

"We need board books for babies and toddlers. We are significantly short of (these) because we are at three hospitals which have NIC (neonatal intensive care) units. We need books that parents can read aloud to their children," Krista said.

"Well-known ones — like 'Goodnight Moon' and 'Guess How Much I Love You,'" Andy Layman said.

Krista added famous character books, such as Clifford, Dora and Thomas, to the list. "When kids are hurting or sick, they really relate to characters they know. It comforts them," she said.

"Older teens like the fun books — sports, trivia — and girls like the teen romances. They don't want to read the classics (like) 'Treasure Island,'" she said.

A recent book drive at Borders bookstore netted more than \$5,500 and 1,374 books.

The volunteers

Schmidt, a longtime family friend, serves on the board and volunteers at all four local hospitals.

"Since I've always been a reader, I could particularly relate to and support giving books to hospitalized children," she said. "Before I started handing out books ... I had no idea how many sick babies and children there are in the Fort Wayne area."

Miller is volunteer coordinator for Lutheran Hospital, scheduling 30 people a month to operate the carts three times a week. She gives out books, reads to children to give an exhausted mom a break, and provides an ear to frightened parents.

"I'm honored and blessed to be part of this organization," she said. "To be part of a blessing in a child's life in such a trying time is humbling."

Healing

"I think the success of Kate's Kart has been a huge healing process," Krista said. "As a parent, you want your child to grow up, be a success and make a difference in the world. Even though Kate only had 18 months, she's still impacting the world. She's not forgotten. Her legacy is ongoing."

"It's really rewarding when people say the book relieved their child for a few minutes," Andy said. "We remember that. We know what it was like. If this ends tomorrow, it did what it was supposed to do."

"Our faith has gotten us through," Krista said. "Our belief that one day we will see Kate again. Once you have a child go to heaven, it's even more enticing — I'm one day closer, sweeter, I'm one day closer."

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