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Gala Helps Cancer Patients On Their Yellow Brick Road To Recovery

As soon as Brianna Kearney clicked her heels, she was "Over the Rainbow."

Brianna stole the heart of world-renowned performer Ben Vereen who rushed to serenade her with the melody Judy Garland sang about a lost girl's quest to get home.

Brianna is being treated at Connecticut Children's Medical Center for acute lymphoblastic leukemia.

And not only did the 8-year-old Glastonbury girl win over Vereen — who followed up with a rendition of "Dream the Impossible Dream" — she won over the 500-strong in attendance at the 2008 Connecticut Children's Medical Center Auxiliary Storybook Gala. The gala is the signature fundraising event for Connecticut Children's and took place Nov. 1 at the Hartford Marriott Downtown. The event raised a record-breaking \$450,000 for Connecticut Children's.

"It was an incredible night and we're grateful to give back to Connecticut Children's for every-

thing they have done for Brianna," said Brianna's mother Kristina.

A special night was expected by all those who attended the Gala which was headlined by the Emmy and Tony Award-winning Vereen, as well as renowned children's author, Suzy Kline. But no one knew about the special surprise in store from the Ruby Slipper Cancer Foundation for Children, which was founded last spring in honor of Brianna by her parents, Michael and Kristina.

As part of the event's spotlight program, "Bid 4 Kidz," Brianna's grandfather and foundation board member Emil Sapere, Jr., announced that the Ruby Slipper Cancer Foundation for Children was donating an unprecedented \$100,000 which was raised three weeks prior to the Gala. It is the foundation's first-ever donation.

"Word got out quickly about our foundation and most of the donors came to us on their own including one with a \$25,000 gift," Sapere said.

Michael Kearney said his daughter basked in the instant celebrity status brought upon her at the Gala. At one point during the night, a short trip to get a drink took longer than expected because of everyone who wanted to meet Brianna and have a photo taken with her. The Gala wasn't the first Connecticut Children's event the Kearneys have taken part in — over the summer the family participated in the Medical Center's Cycle of Life event which coincided with the nationwide celebration of National Cancer Survivors Day.



Brianna Kearney, 8, stole the heart of all those in attendance at the 2008 Connecticut Children's Medical Center Auxiliary Storybook Gala including headlining guest, Ben Vereen, who serenaded her with "Over the Rainbow" and "Dream the Impossible Dream."

"Our life is not a storybook," said Michael Kearney. "But we will have a storybook ending."

All the funds raised through Bid 4 Kidz will support the construction of a new \$5 million clinical care center at Connecticut Children's for children with cancer and blood diseases. This facility will unite and expand clinical care services, research initiatives and family support programs in one new state-of-the-art setting.

"We've always advocated involving our families in fundraising because it is a clear, shared relationship," said Martin Gavin, President and Chief Executive Officer of Connecticut Children's. "Besides, who better is there to testify about the vital role Connecticut Children's plays in the state?"

Shortly after Brianna was diagnosed in 2007, Michael and Kristina started the Ruby Slipper Cancer Foundation for Children to raise funds to improve the quality of life for children with cancer and to better the outcomes of cancer treatments through the investment and support of research, patient care, nursing education, and information and awareness.

"It's devastating for a parent when they find out that their child has been diagnosed with cancer," said Kristina Kearney. "I would have mortgaged my house to make sure our daughter got the finest in cancer treatment and as it turns out, the finest care is available right in our own backyard."

Martha Schall, vice president of the Connecticut Children's Medical Center Foundation said the new Hematology/Oncology care center will expand opportunities in cancer research and clinical trials through innovative therapies and the newest technologies.

"It's an honor to have the Ruby Slipper Cancer Foundation for Children generously pledge their support and help build this center for these children who are forced into a life-altering experience," Schall said.

As part of the Gala program, the Kearneys each spoke about their experience at Connecticut Children's. Their portion of the program ended with Brianna introducing Vereen whose memorable performances include television's "Roots" and recent stage performances in "Chicago," "Pippin" and "Wicked." Suzy Kline, the other special guest of the night, resides in Willington, Conn, and is best-known for authoring the "Horrible Harry" series as well as her books about Song Lee.

Connecticut Children's Medical Center Auxiliary Co-President Lisa Sundean, RN, said Vereen and Kline as well as gala auctioneer Mike Watt were given tours of the medical center in the days leading up to the event.

"I think visiting some of the families had a particularly profound effect on Ben Vereen," Sundean said. "He came for a tour just a few hours before the Gala and I think what he witnessed heavily influenced his presentation that night. I even think his singing to Brianna was improvised because it was clearly coming from the heart."

Other guests at this year's gala included emcee Logan Byrnes, morning news anchor from Fox61 WTIC-TV and WDRC-AM radio personality Brad Davis. Special congratulations and thanks go out to Lisa Benson and Sally MacGilpin, who co-chaired this year's Gala, along with everyone else who contributed to making this record-breaking event possible.



There was no shortage of guests at this year's Storybook Gala who wanted their photo taken with Brianna Kearney who is shown with (from left): her parents Michael and Kristina Kearney, performer Ben Vereen, and her grandparents Mary and Emil Sapere.

New Name, Old Friends



With over 500 people in attendance, this year's Storybook Gala was the biggest yet — and like the Gala which continues to expand, the support provided by the Connecticut Children's Medical Center Auxiliary continues to grow as well. So much so, in fact, that at this year's Gala, the group formerly known as the CCMC Auxiliary announced that it was changing its name to Connecticut Children's Medical Center Friends.

According to Lisa Sundean, RN, Co-President of Friends, the name change occurred in part due to the changes that have taken place within the organization itself. "The original Auxiliary was formed back in 1968 when the hospital was still in Newington and was made up primarily of doctor's wives," commented Ms. Sundean. "Since then, the organization has expanded in many different ways and we feel the name change is more reflective of our organization today."

Over the next year, Friends plans to partner more closely with the Connecticut Children's Medical Center Foundation to help play an even greater role within both the Medical Center and the community. "Many people who come to Connecticut Children's are so impressed with their experience that they often ask how they can help," Ms. Sundean said. "We think that joining Friends is the perfect opportunity for those people who want to give back and become involved with everything we do here."

For more information on Connecticut Children's Medical Center Friends, please visit our website at www.connecticutchildrensfriends.org.