

In honor of son, Montvale parents hold first-ever 'Superhearts New Jersey' walk



photo courtesy of joanie schwarz

These children, all of whom have had corrective heart surgery, will be participating in the Superhearts New Jersey walk at Pascack Hills High School in Montvale on May 15. From left: Nicholas Hasenecz, Adriana Sroka, Cooper Palatnek, David Rosenblum, Iliana Restrepo, and Victoria Kempf.

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PASCACK VALLEY COMMUNITY LIFE

Earlier this month, six kids ranging from toddler to teenager entered a room to get their picture taken together.

There was 9-year-old David Rosenblum, Victoria Kempf and Iliana Restrepo, both under the age of 10 and playfully holding hands, 2-year-old Nicholas Hasenecz, who was reaching for a stuffed bunny from teenager Adriana Sroka, and then there was 4-year-old Cooper Palatnek, wearing a bright smile that lit up the room. While all the children are of different age groups and backgrounds, they share something in common that links them to one another: a scar on their chests - some fresher than others - which they got from undergoing surgery to correct a heart defect they were born with.

"I think that he doesn't know what self-conscience means," explains Cooper's mom, Jaime, who lives with her family in Montvale. "He's at the age now where kids point out at it and have questions [about it]."

While people with surgical scars don't typically boast them to the world, (Jaime says Cooper's scar is about five inches long) the kids revealed them proudly to each other that day per the creative direction of photographer Joanie Schwarz. While Cooper is a vivacious child who may be "slow to warm up," as his dad Todd described, he eventually joined the other kids when he realized that they were all cut from the same cloth.

It was an emotional moment for the moms. Jaime met them through Bergen County Moms, a website where mothers communicate through a discussion board to share ideas for things like birthday parties, play dates and favorite recipes. Jaime posted a message seeking volunteers for her and Todd's first-ever "Superhearts New Jersey" family walk and fun day on Sunday, May 15 at Pascack Hills High School from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

The couple is involved in the Children's Heart Foundation - an Illinois nonprofit consisting of volunteers who fundraise for "the most promising research for congenital heart defects," according to the website. They were first involved with the Children's Heart Foundation when they were still living in Manhattan and Cooper was first diagnosed. They started Superhearts recently to continue fundraising efforts in their own community. To date, they have raised more than \$13,000 and hope to reach \$20,000.

After posting the message, Jaime said she received "100 messages" from people wanting to help out, including messages from the mothers of the kids who were at the photo shoot. The picture they posed for (shown above) will be displayed to promote the upcoming walk on the Children's Heart Foundation website, the Superhearts Facebook page and on large banners that will be posted throughout the area leading up to the walk.

"I wanted to get them together [to show] pictures of them now, how big they are and how great they're doing," said Jaime.

Cooper's story

Cooper was first diagnosed with a congenital heart defect in October 2011 when he was four months old. His mom, however, said she knew something wasn't right earlier on.

"To this day, from the minute we brought him home from the hospital, I had a feeling something wasn't right," Jaime recalled.

While she said "he didn't look like he was in distress," Cooper had trouble thriving as "he didn't want to eat."

"I convinced myself he had an intestinal issue," she said, "anything [but] his heart."

Cooper was seen by a pediatric gastroenterologist who informed his parents that a faint heart murmur was heard. A cardiologist informed his family that a hole existed in both Cooper's upper and lower chamber and there was a clog in his mitral valve. His diagnosis was a Complete Atrioventricular Valve Canal defect, a combination of numerous heart problems that makeup a large defect in the heart's center.

Cooper underwent a five-hour open-heart surgery at Morgan Stanley Children's Hospital in New York City to repair the defect. Congenital heart defects, or heart defects present at birth, are a common birth defect with about one in 100, or 40,000 newborns affected each year. Heart defects are responsible for one-third of all birth defect-related deaths and as many as 20 percent of children will not survive past their first birthday.

"[It was] one of the worst moments of our lives," recalled Jaime. "He was a rock star. He came out [of surgery], he did great."

Moving forward

Since his diagnosis, the couple got involved with the Children's Heart Foundation and participated in their annual walk in New York. Two years later, Todd, who is originally from Woodcliff Lake, moved his family from the city to Montvale where they now live with their two sons (the other is 1-year-old Alex) and a dog. The family wanted to focus their efforts in the New Jersey community after they relocated to Montvale, so they started Superhearts New Jersey.

At least 200 people are expected to attend the event next month, which will consist of a one-mile walk around the football field. A DJ, face painting and various prizes will be raffled off, including Giants and Yankees tickets, gift certificates to nail salons and handbags. Even more special, two students from the high school, Harry Zuckerman and Kyle Pearlman, will be in attendance. The friends co-authored the book "Friends Help Hearts Heal." Zuckerman also underwent surgery for a congenital heart defect.

"I feel like it means everything to me," said Jaime of the upcoming walk. "For Cooper, it's going to be such a good representation of who he is, and how far he's come. Ten months out of surgery, we were so scared and not sure if he would run and play and be a normal kid. He's going to be running the first lap."

Todd agrees that the day will be about celebrating children everywhere who have been touched by a heart condition.

"It's very satisfying for me to see where we are," he said.

Nearly five years later, Cooper is doing great. On the afternoon of April 20, he was practicing T-ball in his backyard. His father Todd said he can run really fast and is a "maniac on the soccer field."

Cooper, Jaime says, truly defies the odds.

"It makes us happier than any other parent," she said.

To register for the walk, go to superheartsnj.com.

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