

Dreams live on in toy boxes for stricken children

Editor's note: *Hometown Heroes spotlights everyday happenings that don't make the headlines. If you have a story you'd like to share, contact Chris Arbutina at 231-4619 or carbutin@centredaily.com*



By Chris Rosenblum
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STATE COLLEGE — They were a child's dream for a child's nightmare.

Into the dozens of shoe boxes and plastic bins went puzzles, toy cars, costume jewelry, books, bubble soap, crayons, stuffed animals — and a lot of heart from caring children.

"It's like a box of love," said Ruth McMullen of Ferguson Township.

Last November, McMullen lost her 6-year-old son, Jared, to a brain tumor. On Wednesday, in the Our Lady of Victory Catholic Church gym, she watched his two brothers and sister join vacation Bible camp classmates in making about 100 "Jared Boxes" for chronically ill children.

The boxes, which also contain cards and prayers, will go to the Janet Weis Children's Hospital in Danville. That's where Jared, who attended Our Lady of Victory preschool and kindergarten, went for more than a year of chemotherapy, steroid injec-

tions and other treatments that often lasted for hours.

On his visits, Jared would bring a backpack full of toys. McMullen remembers her son noticing other sick children waiting without any diversions.

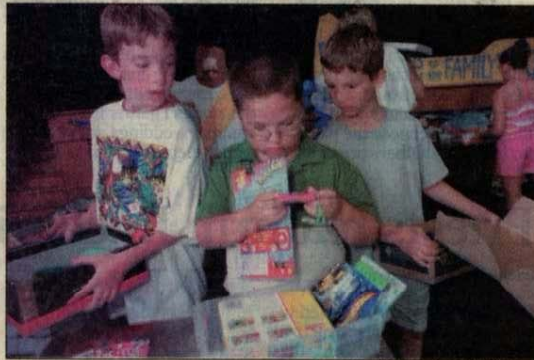
"It hurt Jared," McMullen said. "When he went by those rooms and saw those kids with nothing to do, he said to me, 'Mommy, why don't those kids have anything?'"

"Jared would be thrilled to hear that these kids are willing to do this," she said. "He wanted those children to play."

Cindy Kolarik of State College, a friend of the McMullens whose two children filled boxes, organized the effort. Kolarik said the idea was to brighten the lives of suffering children while teaching campers, most of whom knew Jared, a lesson in reaching out.

"We were looking for some way for these kids to understand the joys of giving and helping others," she said.

She sent out a flyer to parents and children inviting them to



CDT photo/Michelle Klein

Marc McMullen, 9, right, pauses while taking a break from making "Jared Boxes," in honor of his 6-year-old brother who died from cancer. With him at Our Lady of Victory Catholic Church's vacation Bible school are Kyle Surovec, 9, of Boalsburg, left, and Joey Oehlert, 8, of Bridgeport.

buy toys, games and "dollar-store stuff" for the boxes. They responded with enough to fill several tables.

Among the campers was Victoria Herr, 8, of Pine Grove Mills. She chose a stuffed bird and a paint set for her box items and included a card with a hand-drawn heart and a wish for a "speedy recovery." All the time she imagined ill children.

"I was thinking about what it would really be like for them," she said.

Becky Drumheller, a certified child life specialist with the hospital, looks forward to giving the boxes to young hospital and clinic patients.

And, best of all, children picked the items, she said.

"When it comes from kids to kids, it's going to be right on target for what they enjoy," she said. "It means more."

The boxes already mean a great deal to the McMullens, who received an outpouring of support from local residents and

TO DONATE

Anyone interested in the Jared Boxes project can contact Cindy Kolarik at 353-9343 or cindybudzy@aol.com



Jared

Penn State students during the 13 months Jared battled for his life.

Daniel McMullen, 13, made a box, as did his 11-year-old sister Sara and 9-year-old brother Marc. They know what Jared went through, what other children face. They hope the boxes help.

"I really like this idea," Daniel said.

For Ruth McMullen and her family, it's a way of preserving the memory of a brave little boy who died in his bed at home as his favorite song — Phil Collins' "You'll Be In My Heart" from the movie "Tarzan" — played.

Said McMullen: "Honoring Jared this way is also helping our family go through the healing process."

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