

Operation Cheer

*Dalton
Ashworth and
his brother Logan
enjoy spreading
holiday cheer.*



LAURA EMERY PHOTO



Lunenburg County brothers spread seasonal cheer to kids hospitalized during the holidays

Dalton Ashworth, 11, lies in a sterile white hospital bed as thoughts of his shiny new baseball bat and warm, summer baseball-diamond days dance in his head.

Just outside his window, festive lights twinkle against a backdrop of brick and mortar, a reminder that the world beyond the hospital walls is still celebrating the holidays.

It's the week after Christmas, 2013. Dalton has just been diagnosed with Crohn's disease at Richmond's St. Mary's Hospital. His parents, Carl and Rachael Ashworth of Victoria, are relieved to finally have a diagnosis for their son's ongoing affliction.

"It was an absolute nightmare," Rachael, a member of Southside Electric Cooperative (SEC), begins, recalling the experience. "He had been getting progressively worse as it got closer and closer to Christmas, and he hadn't been eating anything. He ended up losing 13 pounds."

Christmas came, and Dalton spent most of his time in bed, while his Christmas gifts, including the brand-new baseball bat, sat idle on the floor. "It was so hard to watch him wither away," Rachael says. "I knew something was seriously wrong and that he needed to go to the hospital."

Crohn's is an incurable intestinal disease that blocks the body's ability to absorb the nutrients it needs. "It was a very difficult time for our family. He was hospitalized for a total of 45 non-consecutive days over a period of four months. He was also in the hospital on Easter and Valentine's Day," Rachael says.

"Nobody wants to be confined to a hospital bed during the holiday season. I definitely didn't," Dalton, now 14, says. Being unable to play baseball or attend school was devastating to the active preteen whose dream is to be a professional baseball player. He longed to trade his hospital gown for a baseball cap and cleats, the smell of disinfectant for that of a well-worn leather mitt, and the sound of medical equipment for the inimitable crack of bat against ball.

Dalton's beloved baseball is a game of happenstance: pitch to pitch, it's



While hospitalized at St. Mary's Hospital with Crohn's disease in 2013, Dalton Ashworth, then 11, longed to be on the mound again, baseball in hand. Though life had thrown the youngster a curveball, he handled it with great aplomb. "Not being able to play baseball was devastating to Dalton, but he still stayed positive," his mother, Rachael, says. "Adults could learn from his outlook on life and dealing with what life throws at you."



unpredictable. His illness shares this trait. Doctors explained to the Ashworth family that while medications help manage the symptoms of Crohn's disease, Dalton's battle with the illness will be lifelong, and unpredictable flare-ups are inevitable.

Rachael remembers the heartache when she first heard the news. "At first, I was heartbroken. I felt like he wasn't going to be able to live a 'normal' life and do the things that he loves to do ... like baseball. Dalton was disappointed, but he took the news surprisingly well," she says.

Life had thrown the youngster a curveball, but he handled it with great aplomb. "I remember Dalton confidently telling me that it was going to be okay. Adults could learn from his outlook on life and dealing with what life throws at you," Rachael reflects.

Though buoyed by his resolve to remain positive, Dalton was still an 11-year-old child stuck in the hospital and missing the comforts of home and the holidays. On the third day of his hospital stay, he received an unexpected surprise that bolstered his spirits and had a lasting influence on him.

Right after lunch his nurse, a warm-hearted woman, entered the small, sparse patient room, moving at her usual swift, purposeful pace. She was wearing Winnie-the-Pooh scrubs that day, Dalton remembers. He noticed that she had a colorfully wrapped package in her hands. The nurse explained that the present was part of a larger donation of gifts for young patients spending Christmas in the hospital's pediatric ward. She wanted Dalton to have it.

A grateful smile spread across Dalton's face, and his spirits were instantly lifted. "Even though I was really sick, it made me feel good. It meant a lot to me," he recalls.

The unexpected gift — a set of Halo Mega Blocks — kindled holiday spirit in the sterile, unfamiliar environment. It also brought an awareness to the perceptive preteen that behind the beige doors lining the hospital's pediatric corridor were other sick, ailing children who had spent the holidays in the hospital.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE ASHWORTH FAMILY



(Left) Carl, Logan, Dalton and Rachael Ashworth arrive at Richmond's St. Mary's Hospital in December of 2015 with a vehicle packed full of presents meant to put smiles on the faces of hospitalized children. (Right) Accompanied by their parents and Ilona Scanlon, certified child life specialist for St. Mary's Hospital, the Ashworth brothers dole out gifts from a bright-red wagon to children in the hospital's pediatric unit.

For these children, there were no cheerful Christmas trees, no stockings hung by the fireplace with care, no holiday meal at home with all the trimmings — just alarms beeping, call lights ringing, and nurses making rounds in constant motion.

The moment became the inspiration for Dalton's holiday project, one embodying the true spirit of the season. "When he was discharged from the hospital, he told us that he really wanted to do a toy drive. He knew how that gift made him feel, and he wanted other kids to feel the same way, if only for a few minutes," Rachael says. His 11-year-old brother, Logan, also wanted to be involved.

And so, Operation Cheer was born.

The two Lunenburg County lads started the local toy-drive initiative by spreading the word with homemade flyers distributed by friends and family throughout the community. The premise of Operation Cheer is simple: There's nothing joyous about a sterile, white hospital bed at Christmastime. As Dalton now knows, a random act of kindness — in the form of a wrapped gift — can go a long way in lifting the spirits of a hospitalized child who might not be having the happiest of holidays.

"I think it's really wonderful that Dalton wants to give back to other kids hospitalized during the holidays ... because he knows exactly what that feels like," says Ilona Scanlon, certified child life specialist for St. Mary's Hospital. "He and his brother are making a difference."

The brothers' holiday project was a home run. Two years in a row, the boys saw their hard work pay off in a massive mound of toy donations piled high in the

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family's sunroom. Beneath brightly colored papers adorned with ribbons and bows were gifts of every shape and size, each package coded to indicate the gender and age of the child for whom the gift was appropriate. Donated gifts included blankets, board games, books, stuffed animals, remote-control cars, dolls, hand-held electronic games, action figures, sports items, tea sets — all things certain to bring a smile to a child's face.

"Dalton and Logan do this on their own, and my husband and I are just so proud to know these boys," exclaims Lucy "Cookie" Currin, a close family friend and wife of SEC board member Dr. Earl Currin. Currin is so close to the boys that they fondly call her Grandma Cookie, though they are not related by blood.

Currin speaks highly of the two youngsters. "The way Dalton handled his medical problems was inspirational. He remained positive and made the best of it. His younger brother, Logan, is equally as outstanding. With Operation Cheer, they are setting a good example for other kids by being selfless and doing something for others. Dalton identified a need while he was in the hospital, and he and his brother stepped up to the plate."

The magic of the season comes to life when the toys are finally delivered to the hospital shortly before Christmas. For the past two years, the boys have decked the hospital halls with holiday spirit, doling out gifts from a brimming bright-red wagon. The gifts are given to patients in the pediatric unit, the pediatric intensive care unit, and the Outpatient Pediatric Infusion Center at St. Mary's Hospital.



The halls of St. Mary's Hospital are familiar to Dalton Ashworth. It was here that he was diagnosed with Crohn's disease in 2013. Dalton is pictured here with younger brother Logan and Ilona Scanlon, certified child life specialist for St. Mary's Hospital.

Being able to place gifts into little hands and see the resulting smiles and grateful tears of harried, stressed-out families touches the boys' hearts. "Dalton and Logan actually give the wrapped gifts to the patients, unless the children are on restrictions, and then the gifts are taken to them by the hospital staff and the boys wave at them from the hall," Rachael says. "You can tell how touched the children and the parents are, and that is priceless."

Kristin Barry, of Richmond, is one of those parents. Her daughter, an effervescent blond-haired, blue-eyed child, was 5 months old when she suddenly came down with the flu. It was just days before Christmas when she was admitted to St. Mary's Hospital.

The family was devastated to be spending their daughter's first Christmas behind hospital walls, but tried to remain positive. Santa will come another day, Barry would reassuringly whisper in her daughter's ear. So when delicately wrapped Christmas gifts were delivered to their hospital room, Barry was surprised and grateful to experience a little touch of Christmas. "My daughter got several presents, and it was really sweet," she says. "It was very special and not at all expected."

And that is why the success of Operation Cheer means so much to

Dalton, a student at Central High School, and Logan, a student at Lunenburg Middle School. "While other kids are opening presents and spending time with their family at home, there are kids stuck in the hospital, unable to open presents or be at home," Dalton says. "They shouldn't have to feel forgotten."

Last year, the boys handed out about 150 wrapped gifts. "We were really pleased

with that number," Rachael says. The brothers hope to give out just as many, or more, gifts this year.

Dalton has even bigger dreams, too. When he becomes a professional baseball player like his idol Derek Jeter, the now-retired All-Star shortstop for the New York Yankees, Dalton would like to see a unit at the hospital devoted just to children with Crohn's disease. "I love him. He dreams big," Rachael says, smiling.

But, for now, bringing yuletide cheer to hospitalized youngsters is satisfaction enough. Dalton says, "It feels really good to give hospitalized kids a reason to smile, especially during the holidays." ■

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CROHN'S DISEASE FACTS

- Crohn's disease is a chronic inflammatory disease of the intestines.
- The cause of Crohn's disease is unknown.
- Crohn's disease can cause ulcers in the small intestine, colon or both.
- Abdominal pain, diarrhea, vomiting, fever and weight loss are symptoms of Crohn's disease.

Source: www.medicinenet.com/crohns_disease/article.htm