

Small steps to recovery: *The story of Signe Morrow*

Signe – a feminine name of Scandinavian origin meaning “new victory.” It’s a fitting name for Signe Morrow, a 3-year-old patient in Madonna’s Pediatric Family Centered Program. Behind her trademark pink glasses and charming smile lies a little soldier who fought off cancer.

Signe, of Lincoln, Neb., was diagnosed at 5-months-old with medulloblastoma, the most common malignant brain tumor that affects roughly 350 children annually.¹ On March 8, 2006, a neurosurgeon at the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) removed the tumor that was pressing on Signe’s cerebellum and affecting her balance. It would be six weeks before Signe was cleared to go home. Her parents, Stephanie and Kirk, were a constant, reassuring presence. “We made a vow that we’d never leave her alone,” said Stephanie.

The formerly active infant went from exploring her toes to dealing with chemotherapy. Signe had been home for one week when she was back at UNMC for an intensive six-course treatment of chemo. Her parents diligently woke their daughter every four hours for a bath, carefully scrubbing her mouth with swabs to prevent sores from forming. The final round was followed by a stem cell transplant to produce new blood cells, replacing the normal cells lost during the high-dose chemotherapy.

Signe’s tiny immune system was compromised, but the determined infant fought back. The tumor or chemo had also weakened her eye muscles, causing her eyes to cross. Signe was fitted with glasses before her first birthday to improve her vision.

By Feb. of 2007, Signe was strong enough to begin in-home physical therapy with Bryan Home Health. Nearly a year later, Signe’s blood counts rebounded and Stephanie enrolled the now-toddler in Madonna’s outpatient pediatric rehabilitation program.

“Our main goal has been to get Signe walking independently again,” shared Stephanie. Signe would struggle to pull herself up during those first weeks at Madonna. Her therapy team chose core strengthening and range of motion exercises for Signe, especially targeting her hips. During a recent session, Kilee Oetjen, physical therapist, encouraged Signe to stand at a table while she crafted Play-Doh® snowmen. What may appear to be child’s play to the casual observer is actually an intense workout for Signe’s muscles.

Signe’s grandmother, Sherry Vap, brings the toddler to her twice-a-week therapy sessions and shared her observations. “The difference I’ve seen in Signe since coming to Madonna is amazing—she’s stronger,” said Sherry. She credits the creativity of the therapists, along with her young granddaughter’s determination.

Signe was recently given a child-sized walker that gives her a newfound freedom. Her mobility has increased from being pushed in a stroller or crawling, to being independently mobile with her walker. “Signe’s self-confidence and independence have increased tremendously during her time at Madonna as a result of the progress she’s made in all her therapies,” noted Kilee. She said that Signe continually pushes the therapy team to keep new and exciting activities in their bag of “therapy tricks.” “Signe has a motivation and zest for life that is so inspiring!” Kilee added.

Stephanie tries to work a variety of activities into Signe’s daily routine to supplement her therapy at Madonna. There are trips to the Lincoln Children’s Museum for sensory stimulation and classes at Irving Rec Center and Pioneers Park. On weekends, they try to fit in a trip to the zoo or grocery store to help Signe practice walking. One of her favorite phrases now is “Look! I can do it myself!” once she masters a task.

Blessed with an extensive vocabulary, Signe loves to read and has a creative imagination. Her cognitive skills are soaring. She is quick to join in on any “pretend play” games, often making suggestions during therapy.

Looking ahead, Stephanie said Signe will soon be evaluated for vision therapy at Madonna, in addition to continuing her outpatient visits in 2009. Considering all she’s tackled, it should pose no problem for the pint-sized patient who certainly lives up to her name and will no doubt emerge “victorious.”

¹Source: emedicine.medscape.com



Kilee Oetjen, physical therapist, works with Signe Morrow on core strength and balance as the toddler builds a Play-Doh® snowman.

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—Signe’s Grandma