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Beads of Courage

A local program helps children with cancer face their treatment with valor

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>[REVIEW-JOURNAL](#)

Children diagnosed with cancer face grown-up fears well beyond their years. Still in it's infancy, a local program is working to remind those children and their families that the Las Vegas community supports them -- one bead at a time.

Sandy Patterson lost her two-year-old son, Ryan, to Neuroblastoma almost 16 years ago. For the past 15 years, Patterson has worked as a volunteer with young cancer patients. In August of 2000, Patterson, her husband and daughter relocated to Las Vegas from Knoxville, Tenn. On a scouting trip she stopped by Sunrise Children's Hospital and explained she would like to volunteer once they moved.

Patterson had been volunteering for the East Tennessee Children's Hospital where a program was being developed to help children cope, psychologically, with their treatment. The premise revolved around giving children colored beads for each of their treatments.

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Patterson suggested to Sue Waltermeyer, the child life specialist at Sunrise, that a similar program could be implemented in Nevada. Waltermeyer worked with Patterson to flush out the details of how the program would work. They presented the idea to Jeff Gordon, president of Nevada Childhood Cancer Foundation, and within six months the Profiles of Courage Beads program was born.

In July 2004 at Camp Cartwheel, a five day long camp for kids with cancer and their siblings, 150 children between the ages of five and 17 strung their necklaces.

"One father watched and told his child the beads were like his military medals, saying those are for the bravery and courage you have shown," Patterson recalled.

The children were all given a bead legend, which is the chain on which the beads are placed. Each child chose to either string their name or the camp's name, and then were given beads representing various experiences related to their treatment. The individual beads are made of wood, acrylic and ceramic material and offer a visual equivalent to the child's corresponding treatment.

There are 28 different treatment beads -- a child who has a bone marrow transplant receives a bone bead; for a shot the patient gets a bee bead to represent the sting of the needle. There's a bead for radiation treatments that glows, and a child who goes to the hospital with a fever is given a sunshine bead. Five square beads making up the colors of the rainbow represent the five stages of chemotherapy. Once the treatment is over, the child is given a sixth bead signifying the end of their treatment and hopefully the road to recovery.

Patterson remembered one six-year-old heading into his last chemo treatment looked at her and said, "after this I get the rainbow."

"When they go into a procedure their mind is more on what bead they are going to get rather than what procedure they're going in for," Gordon said. "I thought this would be an exciting program for kids, to be able to give them something to look forward to when they usually associate trips to the clinic with nothing fun."

The beads have also become a way for the children to relate to each other. Patterson said often one child will see another's bead legend and notice the other child has already had a treatment they're having soon. It can encourage the child to ask the other about the treatment, or even in silence know that someone else has gone through what he or she is about to embark upon.

Siblings are included in the program. Each time a sibling has to spend their birthdays in the hospital, they get a special bead. Three siblings at Camp Cartwheel last summer strung golden bone beads because they were donors for their sibling's bone marrow transplants.


Family and friends also support the Beads of Courage program by buying Bravery Heart necklaces and bracelets. The proceeds of these glass beaded necklaces helps the NCCF pay the estimated \$10,000 cost of the Beads of Courage program. The Bravery Heart jewelry is sold in Las Vegas through the NCCF's web site: www.nvccf.org. Necklaces retail for \$20 and bracelets are \$15. Gordon said the jewelry is also available in most Valley hospital gift shops. He said it's heartwarming how people in the Las Vegas community have embraced the Bravery program and are helping to sell and buy the jewelry.

"As people wear the necklaces and bracelets they are helping the kids be brave. The money is going to a worthy cause," Gordon said. "It has made an amazing difference to the kids and their families. There are local grade schools that have helped sell them, and by doing so, are teaching kids to learn about other kids who are not as fortunate."

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