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Benefits aid ailing 5-Year-Old

By Margot Mohsberg, Staff Writer

Until Dec. 21, Laura DiBerardinis was very involved in her community, her church, and her children's school.

She even helped to set up a club at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Annapolis, called the Family Group, to help other families get involved.

Then she found out her 5-year-old son, Vince, had leukemia, and she was forced to focus on just her own children.

"It was one of those things I had heard of, but you never think you are going to be one of them," said Mrs. DiBerardinis, of Hillsmere Shores. "It was pretty unbelievable."

Now, as Mrs. DiBerardinis and her husband, Mark, help Vince fight for his life, their community is preparing to return a smidgen of what the family has given to it.

Tomorrow night, the Hillsmere Elementary School PTA and others will hold a benefit spaghetti dinner. Friends and relatives also are planning a benefit 5K race on May 11.

The proceeds from both events will help pay mounting costs not covered by health insurance, such as travel back and forth to the hospital in Baltimore.

Several businesses, including Pusser's Landing, Loew's Annapolis Hotel and Lewne's Steakhouse, have already donated food for the dinner and prizes for the race. And meals prepared for the family continue to come in, as well as gifts and donations.

"They are a very well-loved family in the community," PTA President Lisa Gaskins said.

One fewer dinner to cook and one fewer trip to the store mean a lot to a family that stays with Vince for days at a time during his treatment at Johns Hopkins children's Center in Baltimore and then makes several trips a week when he is home.

The drastic turn of events for the DiBerardinises followed a standard trip to the doctor for Vince to determine the cause of his chronic sinus and ear infections.

Doctors diagnosed acute myelogenous leukemia, a rapidly progressing cancer of the white blood cells and bone marrow. Vince was sent directly to Johns Hopkins.

He didn't leave for 36 days.

"He packed up his goodies from the school's Christmas party and never came back," his mother said.

Vince received chemotherapy in two cycles of 96 hours, through tubes in his chest and spinal tap.

"He was stronger than I ever could have been," his mother said. "He's not big on asking questions. He just sort of goes along. He lives in the right now."

Vince has three more two-day cycles of chemotherapy, which are separated by weeks of recovery. The entire process is expected to be finished in June.

"The doctors say it is curable and treatable, and that is their hope," Mrs. DiBerardinis said. "I think they are feeling pretty confident."

Throughout the ordeal, Mrs. DiBerardinis has asked for nothing but prayer — not only for Vince, but also for some of the other sick children the family has come to know.

"Would you please include in your prayers a special thought for one of our pals on the eighth floor who lost his battle on Sunday night," she asked in one of her weekly e-mail updates to relatives and friends. "His name was Luke and he was 4 years old."

Gina Culver, a Hillsmere resident who has collected several donations for the dinner and the race, said the community is only beginning to repay Mrs. DiBerardinis for all she has done.

"She's given to the community tenfold of what she's getting," Mrs. Culver said. "She was practically in the school every day, helping with lunch and field trips and so many other things."

DINNER DETAILS

The spaghetti dinner to benefit Vince DiBerardinis will be held at 7pm tomorrow at Hillsmere Elementary School on Arundel on the Bay Road.

The dinner is free, but diners are asked to make a donation to the Vincent DiBerardinis Fund. Checks can also be sent to 321 Hemsley Drive, Queenstown, MD 21658.

For more information about the dinner, call Lisa Gaskins at 410-263-6496.

To learn more about the May 11 benefit run, call Jim Fratino at 800-777-2510.

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