

Her wish was granted: Make-A-Wish surprises St. Joan sixth-grade girl with basement arcade

Joan Demirjian | Posted: Thursday, May 24, 2018 12:00 am

When Delaney Nalepka, 11, walked out to the hallway with her sixth-grade class at St. Joan of Arc School in Chagrin Falls last Friday, she thought it was the traditional clap out for graduating eighth-graders. But the cheers were just for Delaney.

The Auburn Township sixth-grader was diagnosed in October of 2016 with acute lymphoblastic leukemia and is undergoing chemotherapy. The clap-out was part of a Make-A-Wish Foundation grant. Her wish was to turn her basement into an arcade with a jukebox, games, television and sofa to have sleepovers with her friends.

On Friday, fellow students lined the hallways as Delaney was escorted outside to a waiting limousine accompanied by a Bainbridge police cruiser and fire trucks from both Auburn and Bainbridge.

Delaney was greeted outside by her parents Tim and Courtney Nalepka, her brother Hunter, 15, and sister, Maeve, 6, and two best friends. Her grandmother Linda Brzezcko, her aunt Tiffany Notaro from New Jersey and her cousins Natalie and Molly Notaro were there as well.

“It was beautiful and touching,” Ms. Brzezcko said of the gathering.

The clap-out was organized by St. Joan of Arc School Principal Shelley DiBacco. “Delaney had no idea what was going on,” she said.

Auburn Fire Department member Mike Cardaman said it was the first time the department was involved with a Make-A-Wish event. “We always do whatever we can for the community.”

Bainbridge Assistant Fire Chief Wayne Burge was part of the escort and he said they presented Delaney with a junior firefighter’s badge.

Make-A-Wish Foundation grants wishes to children with life-threatening conditions. Wish Granter and Chester Township resident Denise DeGennaro said doctors can nominate a patient for a Make-A-Wish grant. She and Make-A-Wish volunteer Susan Ford of Bainbridge organized the event for Delaney.



Make-A-Wish

Make-A-Wish volunteer Susan Ford ushers Delaney Nalepka, 11, of Auburn to see her Make-A-Wish request come true. Police and fire vehicles and family members met the St. Joan of Arc sixth-grader outside her school and escorted her home to see her basement had been transformed into an arcade, complete with jukebox, games, television and sofa.

The basement transformation began last Friday morning as soon as Delaney left for school. They worked at it all day, Mrs. DeGennaro said, turning the Nalepka's basement into the colorful arcade.

The procession of the limousine, Bainbridge police cruiser and fire department vehicles with lights flashing proceeded from St. Joan of Arc School down East Washington Street to Delaney's home. The spectacle had some drivers wondering about the procession as they pulled over to the side of the road, accommodating the safety vehicles and limousine.

Delaney's friend Giavanna Beatrice, who rode in the limousine, said keeping the secret was hard. Friend Grace Yuhas also rode in the limo. "We waited the whole day for this and it was really cool."

Delaney said, "I was totally surprised. I thought the clap-out was for the eighth-graders.

"It was crazy," she said of walking out of school and seeing the limousine and police and fire departments. "I wondered why my cousins were here."

Once she learned about the basement makeover, she said she was excited to go see what was going on. "I had no idea. It's awesome." The games include a PacMan unit with 60 games on it, a Golden Tee golf game and double hockey machine. There is a large screen television and sleeper sofa in the carpeted room, and it serves as a place to relax and hang out.

It all proves to her "There's a light at the end of the tunnel," Delaney said.

Mrs. Nalepka said of her daughter, "She loves to sing and is in the school choir. She loves horses and took riding lessons at Chagrin Valley Farms and was on the swim team at the Chagrin Valley Athletic Club, both in Bainbridge. And she loves to have fun with her friends.

"Delaney has taken on the fight with incredible courage and a positive spirit and unshakeable faith," Mrs. Nalepka said. She has had to endure hospital stays for treatments as well as for treating E.coli, flu and even chicken pox.

Doctors say when receiving chemotherapy, patients' immune systems are compromised and they are more susceptible to diseases and infections. She is undergoing 2 ½ years of treatment and is scheduled to be done in February of next year, her mother said.

So far, her doctors have said her response to the treatment has been excellent, Mrs. Nalepka said, and they are very happy.

Those who would like to learn more about Delaney and her courageous battle can visit Delaney's Defenders Fight Leukemia on Facebook.