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Friday, June 8, 2001

Bald is beautiful at Incarnation School

By Brenda Rees

text only version

People will do many things for a friend in need. They might lend a hand financially, emotionally or spiritually.

But some students at Incarnation Elementary School in Glendale are showing support in a most unusual way for a fellow student who was recently diagnosed with cancer.



Fifth grader Brad Magcalas learned this spring that he was suffering from bone cancer and that he needed extensive chemotherapy treatments to halt the spread of the disease. Those treatments -- which currently continue -- left Brad hairless as well as little ashamed of his physical condition.

But seven of his buddies at school decided Brad needed not only encouragement but also a good laugh.

So at a recent surprise party for Brad held at the school, they shaved their heads as a way to show Brad he's not alone.

"It was the first time Brad had come back to school since his diagnosis," said fifth grade teacher Nicole Muscarella. "It was the first time his entire class would see him. The kids came up with the idea by themselves. Brad thought it was very cool."

Muscarella said that when Brad was diagnosed, she carefully explained to the class about Brad's condition. But to most students, cancer meant death. Brad's cancer scared them. Muscarella decided it was time to use the incident as a learning experience.

"We went on the Internet, we talked about it and we learned all the different types of cancer, the therapies and the medication," she said. "When they learned that chemotherapy usually means you lose your hair, that's when the kids got the idea for shaving their own heads."

Muscarella also shared with her kids that, when she was their age, she too had a classmate who developed cancer. "I could relate to their fears, their worries, and that helped them," she said.

"Brad was all smiles that day of the party," recalled Alvin Magcalas, Brad's father. "At first he was hesitant to go out because he was bald and on crutches. But after that (party) he had more confidence and goes out without a hat sometimes. He's not embarrassed anymore."

Alvin said that the prognosis for Brad's cancer is good since they caught it so early. Bone cancer can strike young people between 12 and 16 years old at a time in their lives when their bones are growing at a fast rate. Brad goes to chemo at UCLA Medical Center once a week and is set for surgery sometime this summer to remove remaining cancer cells.

The experience has left the Magcalas family -- including Brad's older

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brother and sister -- shaken but stronger, said Alvin. "When you first hear it, it's like someone hits you in the head. It's your child," he said. "I used to pray very little, but now, I pray to God to just keep him alive. I am very happy how things are going and I clap my hands and point to heaven."

Indeed, not only has the school been supportive to the Magcalas family, but the entire parish. "Brad's classmates come over and visit, but I was surprised when parents would stop by with food they have cooked for us," said Alvin. "I knew the school was close-knit but I never dreamed people would be this caring."



Even though school is out for the summer, many of Brad's classmates will be thinking and praying for him. "I feel that my class got very close because of this," said Muscarella. "These things just teach us what is really important in life and to appreciate those little things we take for granted. I am so proud of my students."

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