



Three Generations of Healing

By Sean Morrison

When doctors diagnosed Samuel Klimas, then 10 months, with cancer in 2008, his grandparents immediately summoned their four children – Sammy’s aunts and uncles – and devised a support system to help the family get through treatment for the unexpected and life-threatening illness.

“It is amazing what comes out of parents,” says Kathy McMahon, grandmother to Samuel Klimas. “I saw my youngest child mature into a good advocate for her son. Molly [Sammy’s mother] made all the decisions. We took the supportive role.”

Grandparents like Kathy and her husband Jim McMahon, according to families staying at the *Believe In Tomorrow Children’s House* at Johns Hopkins, add that dynamic charisma essential to keep the lifeblood of the family flowing when a child faces a medical crisis. They travel thousands of miles, step in as the primary caretaker when parents near exhaustion, keep siblings active and entertained, and serve as a family counselor all while watching two generations of offspring go through what could be the hardest time of their lives.

And most, like the McMahon’s, remain humble: “Support is the most important thing,” says Jim. “Certain things that Molly forgot, we picked up on.”

The *Believe In Tomorrow National Children’s*

Foundation, headquartered in Baltimore, Md., runs *The Children’s House* just across the street from the Johns Hopkins hospital’s entrance, where the Klimas family stayed during their child’s treatment. The organization provides hospital housing for critically ill children – in addition to respite housing and adventure programs – with an emphasis on bringing the family together through the healing process. Grandparents are no exception.

“Over the past 27 years I have often been amazed at the many acts of love and dedication that I have witnessed from grandparents,” says Brian Morrison, CEO and founder of *Believe In Tomorrow*.

Grandparents regularly travel great distances for their families. The McMahon’s made multiple trips from Boston to Baltimore for Sammy’s chemo treatments and then stopped over at the Klimas’ home in West Virginia, where Jim disinfected every surface of the home with fervor to prepare for the family’s arrival from the hospital.

“I think we were a little over the top in the beginning

because it was all so new,” laughs Kathy. Other grandparents have made the journey from Virginia, Ohio, Delaware, New York, or further even, to reunite as a family in Baltimore.

To Sheila Settles, whose grandson Caden stayed at the *Children’s House* while receiving treatment for Marfan Syndrome, a genetic disorder that causes organs and bones to grow at an abnormally fast rate, stepping in as a primary caretaker when medical crises strikes comes with being a good grandmother.

“Since he was born, I would take off work in a minute. Whatever was needed done at the house, I would do it,” says Settles, who also fills in as Mom to give Caden’s parents some alone time amidst hospital visits.

Another unique form of family healing performed by grandparents: keeping siblings of critically ill children a part of the family in times that they often feel neglected. Grandparents readily watch siblings of sick children, while in Baltimore at *The Children’s House* or back home. They take siblings for walks in the park, to visit animals at the zoo, or simply keep them occupied with board games and cards so that they are not consumed with worry about their brother or sister in the hospital.

“I could never have done it without them,” says Molly Klimas of Sammy’s grandparents on both sides of the family.

For the Klimas’, also, Ben’s mother, Susan Sharp, stepped in as a family counselor when hospital visits split the family in two.

“My mother-in-law worked at keeping my husband and me on the same page,” says Molly. “I give her credit for keeping my marriage together.”

Grandparents like Susan do all this while buying



groceries, cooking meals, providing transportation, and watching their family face what may be the most difficult situation of their lives.

“In some ways the diagnosis is harder on the grandparent because they’re seeing their kid go through it and their grandkid,” says Molly.

Families staying at *The Children’s House* say grandparents serve all of these diverse roles while providing a fresh energy and positive outlook. And usually, they begin to develop a new closeness with their family.

Says Kathy McMahon: “It’s a positive experience in a bad situation.”

It’s hard to think of grandparents and not imagine smiling, happy grandchildren. The *Believe In Tomorrow Children’s House* staff see a more serious picture, but not necessarily a foreboding one.

While providing extensive physical and emotional support to everybody at *The Children’s House*, visiting grandparents excel at what grandparents love to do: to love their family.

Believe In Tomorrow and the Children’s House at John Hopkins welcome donations, both monetary and in-kind.

94 percent of every dollar goes directly to programs benefiting critically ill children.

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