

Headline: Princeton softball finds a new love in Gwennie Marra

By Michael J. Lewis

It was an awkward meeting, as Friends of Jaclyn adoptions sometimes are at first, at Jadwin Gym on the campus of Princeton University last May 18.

Angela and Lou Marra and their 3-year-old daughter Gwennie were there to meet Gwennie's new best buds, the women of the Tigers' softball team.

Gwennie, diagnosed at 18 months with a brain tumor, was clinging to Angela as each member of the Princeton squad introduced themselves.

Finally, Skye Jerpbak decided she had to act. The then-junior catcher walked up to Gwennie tentatively.

"Hi Gwennie! Can I hold you? Wanna come play?"

And with that, the love affair between a team and a brave little girl who's been through so much, at such a young age, began.

And the Tigers softball team continued the fantastic tradition at the Ivy League school of teams adopting FOJ athletes. Princeton, whose men's basketball team enjoyed a now-legendary relationship with Crunch Regulski, has seen so many of its squads step up and develop wonderful friendships with children, and Gwennie and her brother Donovan (adopted recently by the men's lacrosse team) are the latest to receive the love.

"She just started giggling and I spun her around and all of a sudden she was so happy to be with us," Jerpbak recalls of the adoption day. "I'm naturally a kid person, but Gwennie ... she just makes us all so happy when she comes around."

"We knew this would be a really valuable experience for us, and it's been that and more," said Princeton head coach Lisa Van Ackeren.

Right after the adoption the Tigers team split up for the summer with the end of the school year, but their relationship with Gwennie and the Marras continued to flourish. Jerpbak and sophomore pitcher Ashley LaGuardia, among others, sent cards and letters to Gwennie, Donovan and sister Marleigh. Jerpbak spent time in China and her home in California while on break, and Gwennie was constantly in her thoughts.

"Her mom told us how excited she was to get mail, so we just sent her a lot," LaGuardia said. "You think about Gwennie, and you wonder how could someone this little have already gone through so much?"

Since her diagnosis of neuroblastoma on April 15, 2013, Gwennie has gone through chemotherapy and biopsies, along with having bone marrow and stem cells harvested. After a long period of treatment, Gwennie, now 4, recently passed a milestone of being cancer-free for a year and a half.

This fall, with the Tigers back on campus, Gwennie has become a regular at practice and workouts. The softball team welcomed the Marra family at a Princeton football game, where Gwennie was enraptured by the Tiger mascot, playing with him on the field before the game.

The team also bought Gwennie a Wiffle Ball bat and tee, as it's never too early to train a future superstar.

"She's so vibrant and so sassy and so fun," Van Ackeren said.

"She likes to take our student ID cards out and put them in other people's phones," Jerpbak said with a laugh. "She's just a really funny, sweet kid, and her parents are so gracious and appreciative of anything we do for her and her siblings."

With the softball season set to begin in February, the Princeton team is excited to have Gwennie on the bench and in the stands rooting them on.

"We can't wait to have her see us play and see our biggest fan," LaGuardia said. "She deserves to be happy, and hopefully we can make her happy."



