

Headline: Tara Sankner rounds the bases with help from George Mason softball

By Michael J. Lewis

Lots of players on Tara Sankner's softball team in the Washington, D.C. suburb of Fairfax, Va., get instruction and support from their friends, their family, and of course their coaches.

But she's the only one with a built-in "advantage:" She's got an entire Division I college team rooting her on, helping Tara with her swing and her positioning in the field.

And this 11-year-old fireplug also has some famous friends to hang out with, like Ian Desmond of the Washington Nationals and Pierre Garcon of the Washington Redskins.

"They're so much fun to be around, and they really know what they're talking about (with softball," Tara says. "They'll soft-toss it to me and play with me for as long as I want."

Tara's relationship with George Mason began in 2013, after what had been an incredibly difficult year. As Tammy Sankner, Tara's mom, recounts, Tammy's troubles began when she was 7, when she had a seizure at her babysitter's house. Follow-up tests found two spots on her brain, one on the left front cortex and one on the brain stem. After a 10-day hospital stint, Tara was diagnosed with encephalitis, but a biopsy in February, 2013 revealed Tara had an astrocytoma brain tumor.

"We were shocked and speechless," Tammy says. "We had no indication before this that it could be something like that."

Tara soon began chemo, an agonizing 15-month session that left her feeling "exhausted all the time," she says.

During Tara's stay in the hospital Tammy learned about Friends of Jaclyn, and in August, 2013, George Mason softball officially adopted Tara.

"I was surprised and excited, and I was happy they were so excited to adopt me," Tara says, with a big smile on her face (she smiles a lot talking about George Mason).

The Patriots players quickly made a jersey for her and invited her to sit on the bench during games, and they've hosted Tara at off-campus events as well, like taking their youngest teammate to picnics at Rock Creek Park in Washington, D.C.

The Patriots have also served as babysitters for Tara, and players like Brooke Blankenship, Christina Gabriel and Kat Marsh have been particularly close to her.

Tammy Sankner said she was moved by how emotionally involved George Mason's players became in Tara's treatment (happily, Tammy's most recent bout of chemo ended last November, and she's been feeling better since.)

"When Tara lost her hair for the second time, a lot of the players cried with me and had lots of tears in their eyes," Tammy said. "They and their parents are always asking about her, and when she's going through a bad day, I just have to let one player know and a whole bunch of them text or call."

“They’ve been a huge boost to me; I’m an only child and they’re all like my family now,” Tara said. “It’s so cool to be a part of their team.”

