

Headline: Grace Leva and Vassar College lacrosse make a perfect match

By Michael J. Lewis

Along with all the other pregame routines that the Vassar (N.Y.) women's college lacrosse team goes through, there's one that's constant every time a certain young fan is at the game.

After uniforms are checked and warmups are completed, a 12-year-old girl named Grace Leva helps bring the starting lineup out to midfield.

And then, along with head coach Judy Finerghy and assistant Mark Felch, Grace goes into the team huddle and gets the team fired up.

"She comes over and the team just goes crazy for her, and she says a few words and gets us going," Finerghy says. "She's wonderful to have around every time she's here."

The love is certainly mutual. Ever since her adoption by Vassar in 2011, Grace has had nothing but fabulous experiences on the lacrosse field. Diagnosed with a brain tumor in 2010, but happily cancer-free for the past five years, Grace and her parents, Frank and Fran Leva of Goshen, N.Y. have become part of the Vassar family.

The Brewer players embrace Grace constantly, take her out for pizza, throw her birthday parties, and make her feel as special as possible.

"These girls will be a part of our lives for the rest of our lives," Fran Leva said. "Thanks to Judy and Mark, and the players, we've had such an amazing experience."

Grace's medical journey began in 2010 when she was 6, when a CAT scan at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City revealed a medullablastoma in Grace's cerebellum. After Fran and Frank were first told by a surgeon that "Good luck, it's in a tough spot, I'm not sure it can be operated on," they were fortunately able to indeed find doctors to operate on Grace, and were told that "99 percent" of the tumor had been removed.

Post-surgery, Grace developed posterior fossa syndrome, as well as facial palsy and hearing loss on her left side.

Fortunately, the tumor has not returned, but Grace has endured surgeries to try to help her facial palsy and had to re-learn how to talk after the tumor operation.

While Grace was undergoing chemotherapy she was told about Friends of Jaclyn by a woman named Carolyn Sullivan, whose daughter had recently passed away but had been adopted by an FOJ team. After signing up, the Levas soon heard that Vassar, an hour away from their home, was very interested.

On adoption day in 2011, Grace was "really nervous."

"I was excited because I got to meet everyone, but I didn't know them and wasn't sure what to expect," she says.

"We were just hoping they would give her some friendship and be nice to her and give her that team camaraderie that's so important," Fran says. "They did that and more."

Zoe Ripecky, a former Vassar lacrosse player, said she knew from the start her friendship with Grace would be a lifelong one.

“Coach Judy made it very clear that once she was a part of our family, she was going to stay a part of our family,” Zoe says. “At the beginning Grace showed a lot of pride about being part of our team, and our team has always been very close and inclusive and supportive. As we’ve gotten to know Grace more and as her health has improved, we’ve gotten to see her spunk and energy come out even more.”

The Brewers have taken Grace out for pizza for her birthday, worked with her on her lacrosse skills (she liked to play before she got sick, Frank and Fran say), and send her cards and texts constantly.

“Judy and (assistant coach) Mark Felch have been fantastic,” Frank says. “They set the tone for the players and how they feel about Grace. They are so inspiring and have been so great to us.”

Friends of Jaclyn co-founder Denis Murphy often says that one of the teams that adopts FOJ athletes will produce an individual who will cure pediatric brain tumors.

Well, that person may come from Vassar; Moe Byrne, one of Grace’s first friends on the Vassar squad, is currently in medical school and hoping to research brain tumors.

In the meantime, Grace will keep going to Vassar games, and all her big sisters will keep making her feel at home.

“We’re so fortunate to enjoy the opportunities we have, and Grace reminds us of that,” Judy said. “She’s enriched all of us so much.”

