

## **The FOJ Experience Series, Story No. 1**

**For Mia and Rachel Gurevitz, a lifeline and a feeling of being part of a team.**

**By Michael J. Lewis**

At 18 months of age, Mia Gurevitz of Deerfield, Ill. got the kind of news no toddler should ever have to receive.

Mia was diagnosed with a low-grade brain tumor, right in the middle of her brain. The kind that doctors usually don't want to operate on because of its location.

Since then, Mia's tumor hasn't shrunk, but it's been stable. Her last two scans have been good, but of course as she's gotten older, the more she's understood exactly what's happening to her.

Her mom Lisa, father Dan, and the rest of the Gurevitz family did all they could to buck up Mia's spirits, but it took an introduction to Friends of Jaclyn, first mentioned by a family at the Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, to give Mia a whole new level of support.

"I can't say enough about how wonderful this journey with FOJ has been," Lisa Gurevitz says. "Our family has gotten so much bigger, and it's wonderful."

Mia's parents, were matched up with the Lake Forest (Ill.) College women's softball team in 2013 after meeting coach Joe Kinsella, and Mia, then 3 ½, immediately got a whole bunch of new sisters besides biological older sister Rachel.

Mia quickly started going to practices and games, and suddenly she was talking about third basemen and left fielders who were her new best buds. Lake Forest players like Nikki Miller and Aubrey Pendegraft, starters on that 2013 team, started coming to Mia's dance recitals and over to the house.

The Gurevitzes soon learned what hundreds of other families have learned over the past decade: *This* is what the FOJ Experience is all about; a family in need getting hugs, warmth and companionship from a group of strangers who suddenly aren't strangers anymore.

They're family.

"The players are always peppering us with questions about Mia, and could not be more interested in her scans and everything else," Lisa says. "It's amazing how much compassion these young ladies have. It's been so inspiring to see."

Of course, FOJ is not just about matching up the children with brain tumors with teams; it's also about helping the siblings cope with the awful situation as well.

Rachel, Mia's now 9-year-old sister, naturally was unhappy at times that Mia got so much attention from others.

"It's really hard to hear from your child 'I wish I had a brain tumor, too,'" Lisa says. "It's not fair to her that so much of our time and energy was going to Mia."

Fortunately, last year Rachel was adopted by another Lake Forest team, the women's hockey team, and Lisa said that's made a big difference.

"As much as the (softball) team paid attention to Rachel as well, it's nice that Rachel has her own thing and her own set of friends," Lisa says. "They put together a locker for her and everything; she's not just 'Mia's sister' anymore."

"Cancer has moved our lives together with this special team," Lisa adds. "They're going to be family to us forever. This is a reality, and this is our lives, and cancer's a part of it. It's not normal, it's not always easy, but it has produced some wonderful experiences."

