

## **Headline: Three families, 1 school: Colorado State shows its love to Friends of Jaclyn**

By Michael J. Lewis

It began with an 8-year-old boy named Jack Miller in August of 2013. The Colorado State football team opened its collective arms and welcomed him in right before the start of the season, taking this 4-foot-1 pint-sized bundle of excitement and energy and making him one of their own. They gave him a No. 1 jersey, a locker, and a permanent place in the stands, cheering them on.

Then, like the best kind of infection, CSU's goodwill spread.

In March of 2015 the Rams' volleyball squad welcomed in Sara Robinson, a 10-year-old girl whose parents had heard about FOJ through a story they read about Jack Miller. Sara Robinson's life has been transformed, and in one instance, actually saved, by her relationship with CSU volleyball (more on that life-saving instance next week).

Then, friends of the Robinson family, the Holbrooks, asked if they could get their daughter, Abby, involved with a CSU team as well. Abby doesn't have a brain tumor like Jack and Sara and most FOJ athletes have, but she does suffer from two incurable diseases, Transverse Myelitis and Chiari Malformation, ailments that affect the bladder and brain, respectively. And so last May the CSU swimming and diving team adopted the now 10-year-old Abby Holbrook.

Three teams. Three children whose lives have been so impacted by them. So many stories to tell. Which is why we're doing things a little differently this week at "The FOJ Experience." Because CSU's commitment is so deep, we are for the first time doing a two-part series on a school and its athletes. Today, you'll hear from the families whose children have been adopted, and who are so eternally grateful.

Next week in this space, we'll bring you stories of the coaches and CSU student-athletes talking about how their lives have been affected by these brave warriors.

"It couldn't be a bigger understatement to say this has been a blessing," said Jay Robinson, Sara's father. "What they have done, for us and for Sara, is something I cannot put into words. It's been life-changing."

The Robinson's feelings are echoed by the Millers and the Holbrooks, as each family has found itself enveloped in love by the teams they're associated with.

For the Millers, it's meant watching Jack, a big college football fan, get to hang out with 50-60 of his closest friends on fall Saturdays. He's been to every CSU home game since 2013, he's got his own Upper Deck trading card with his picture on it, and he never seems happier than when he's watching the men in green and gold.

Jack's medical issues began at birth, when he was diagnosed with a heart defect that required surgery. At age 3 a brain tumor was discovered, and of course subsequent surgeries and treatments have followed.

Still, maybe coincidentally, maybe not, Jack's health has improved since he became a member of the CSU team.

"CSU as an organization has really impressed me because I feel like they didn't just adopt Jack for publicity purposes," Jody Miller said in a 2014 interview with the university. "It's been way more than I expected."

That's how the Robinsons feel, too. In a recent Skype interview Mary Robinson said she just hoped her daughter, through FOJ and CSU, would "make some friends, get a little mentoring, and just take her mind off all she has to go through. But it has been so, so much more."

Sara Robinson was adopted at birth by Mary and Jay, and within a few days started having seizures due to epilepsy. She continues to have seizures all the time, and in March, 2014 Sara was diagnosed with a brain tumor behind her left eye. After six months of chemotherapy that failed to shrink the tumor, Sara underwent radiation that has slightly stabilized it, and Sara's eye movement has improved a bit.

The seizures are unrelated to the tumor, Jay said, and unfortunately there's no way to tell when Sara's about to suffer one.

It's been a harrowing experience for the Robinsons, which is why they were so thrilled the Rams volleyball team took such an active interest in Sara. From the moment she was adopted on March 11.

Sara recalled walking into the locker room and seeing balloons and volleyballs and a stool in front of her own locker with her name on it.

"I felt really happy, right away," Sara said. "They always make me happy when I see them." Since the adoption the CSU team has taken Sara out for ice cream, hosted her at team barbecues, and even had a sleepover in the dorms over the summer, where the ladies watched Disney movies and ate candy (sounds good, right?)

"They have literally become our family," Jay said of the nationally-ranked volleyball squad.

"Outside of our immediate family, we've never felt comfortable leaving Sara with anyone. But these girls care so much and have so much love for Sara, that we trust them completely."

Carrie Holbrook, Abby's mom, feels the same way about her daughter's new pals. The swimming and diving team has immediately taken Abby in, giving her some relief and distraction from her medical problems.

Transverse Myelitis is a neurological disorder caused by inflammation across both sides of one level of the spinal cord, and causes significant back pain and bladder control issues in its patients. Abby was diagnosed with it at around 18 months, Carrie said.

A few years later Abby was diagnosed with Chiari Malformation, a brain disease that is essentially caused, in layman's terms, by a person's brain being too large for their head, due to structural defects in the cerebellum, the part of the brain that controls balance.

As a result of her two illnesses Abby has undergone a total of 17 surgeries in her short life, spending so much time in hospitals that it's been impossible to have the life of a "normal kid."

“And her bladder surgeries and her issues with it have been tough as she’s gotten older, because you know how kids can be,” Carrie said.

But since joining up with CSU, Abby suddenly has more friends than she knows what to do with. New teammates like Gabby Morley and McKenzie Thornton have taken Abby to Build-A-Bear workshops, out to dinner, and welcomed her into the water at practices.

“They cheer me up, and make me feel good,” Abby said. “I just really like them, all of them are so nice.”

Carrie said that her daughter “is excited all day” when she knows she’ll be seeing her team. When Abby underwent treatment at Children’s Hospital of Aurora, Colo. recently, nearly every member of the squad reached out to Carrie, checking on Abby’s condition, and when Abby had her 10<sup>th</sup> birthday in September, a team barbecue turned into a birthday party.

“Abby’s a shy girl, but around the team, she becomes totally excited and talkative,” Carrie said. “We are just so thankful that there are so many good people at CSU, helping Abby and Sara and Jack, and everyone.

“It’s a really special place.”