

Headline: The miracle of Vhito DeCapria and the Penn football team

By Michael J. Lewis

On April 9, 2014, 2-year-old Vhito DeCapria's parents were told by doctors he had two weeks to live.

On April 23, 2015, Vhito DeCapria's parents were told he was cancer-free.

There are a million other ways we could start the story of this real-life miracle; there have been twists and turns and happiness and sadness and thrilling moments and dashed hopes and every emotion you could conjure up that even the creators of the Pixar movie "Inside Out" couldn't have imagined.

But the most important thing, the thing you need to know from the start, is the facts that were given to Ashley and Nick DeCapria on those two days, just a year apart.

"We've had producers reach out to us and tell us this should all be a Hollywood movie," Ashley DeCapria says. "To us, it's just been an incredible ordeal."

Before we get into how Vhito, now 4, and his brother Vinnie, now 6, became best pals with the University of Pennsylvania football team (and maybe became their good-luck charm) through a Friends of Jaclyn adoption, a little medical history is in order.

It's an emotional tale told by Ashley, who even now gets understandably teary talking about it. Starting in July, 2013, when Vhito woke up and couldn't move his right arm, the DeCapria's went to 12 different doctors over the next nine months, and none could find anything definitively, seriously wrong with Vhito.

"We were told it was a nerve injury that would get better, or we were told it was Fits disease, but nobody really knew," Ashley says. "It got so bad by February (2014) that he would sleep like 20 hours a day, and wouldn't eat anything."

Shortly after that, the DeCapria's noticed a large bulge coming from Vhito's chest. Incredibly, Ashley and Nick's pediatrician told them the bulge in his chest was normal, and not to worry. But that was of no comfort to them, naturally, so they went to the famous Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP), and there, after being examined by a neurologist, something unmistakable happened.

“We lifted up his right arm, and literally a tumor dropped down from his armpit,” Ashley says. “It was the size of a grapefruit. Finally, we started to get some answers.”

Vhito was soon diagnosed with a rare cancer called atypical teratoid rhabdoid tumor (AT/RT), something fewer than 20 percent of those diagnosed survive. The doctors at CHOP told the DeCaprias that Vhito’s chest was about to collapse, and his spine was in terrible shape, and that he was a mere two weeks away from dying.

“We’d been trying for so long to figure out what was wrong with him, and then to hear that he has this and only 12 other people in the world have it ...” Ashley recalls. “We knew we had to fight as hard as we could for him.”

Vhito was in ICU for a few days, then immediately started chemotherapy, even as CHOP doctors sold the DeCapria’s they thought they’d soon have to amputate Vhito’s right arm. The first dose shrunk the tumor by 25 percent, a whopping amount that stunned doctors. Further chemotherapy worked well enough that doctors were able to operate on Vhito in August, and removed nearly the entire tumor.

It was around this time that new Penn head football coach Ray Priore was looking to get his team involved in Friends of Jaclyn. A longtime college assistant and former teammate of FOJ co-founder Denis Murphy at the University at Albany (N.Y.), Priore had learned of FOJ and knew that if he ever got the chance to run a team, he’d want to adopt a child.

“Jaclyn (Murphy) is about the same age as my daughter, and the more I learned about what she’d gone through and how her team helped her, I definitely wanted to get involved,” Priore said.

As Vhito recovered in the spring of 2015, the adoption of Vhito and Vinnie was finalized. Quakers junior defensive end Tayler Hendrickson remembers the meeting vividly.

“I was tearing up hearing their story, and after talking to Vhito and Vinnie we all liked them immediately,” Tayler says. “And I remember that after a while a bunch of us started to leave and Vhito says ‘Where are all my new friends?’”

They didn't go far. Soon, Vhito and Vinnie were hanging out with the Penn players constantly. Visiting practice, hanging out in the locker room, and even getting babysat by then-sophomore Sam Follansbee, who the family started calling "Nanny Sam."

The Penn players threw the boys pizza parties, and took them around Philadelphia on outings. Vinnie, especially, soaked up all the attention like a sponge, as for so long it had been his brother whose medical issues dominated the family's time.

"Once we started knowing the Penn players," Ashley says, "Vinnie became so much happier."

Once football season arrived last fall, Vhito and Vinnie were firmly part of the team. Sam would take Vhito up to the top of Franklin Field, Penn's legendary home stadium, after practices, with a great view of the city to be had.

"He always wanted to go higher, and he wanted to walk the whole way!" Sam says with a laugh. "I thought it was incredible that kid who physically had been through so much, always wanted to push himself."

Vhito and Vinnie even were part of the Penn football pregame routine, as Priore would hold Vhito while Sam held Vinnie as they walked out to midfield for the opening coin toss. One ref even let Vhito keep the coin.

As the season wore on, the Quaker players came to Vhito's doctor's appointments and scans, playing hide and go seek with him in the hospital waiting room. In mid-November, the family accompanied the team to Boston for the biggest game of the season, against rival, undefeated Harvard. If Penn won, the Ivy League title would be theirs. The night before the game, Priore politely asked Ashley if she'd keep the boys in the hotel room the next morning during team breakfast, as he was concerned his team would lose focus with the two lovable tykes around.

"I told him if I made sure the boys were really quiet and didn't talk to any of the players, could they go?" Ashley says. "He agreed."

The morning of Nov. 14, Vhito and Vinnie walked into the team dining area and were quieter than church mice. Just like the Penn players, the boys had their game faces on.

The Quakers beat Harvard, and claimed the league title. Their two biggest fans were over the moon excited.

An incredible journey that had started so frighteningly was now at a beautiful peak for the DeCapria's.

"I can't even put into words how thankful I am for Friends of Jaclyn and for Penn football," Ashley says, her voice choking with emotion. "The relationships we now have, are so, so incredible."

"The whole Friends of Jaclyn experience is like Make-A-Wish, but it's for the rest of your life," Coach Priore said. "These boys and my team, they're together for the rest of our lives."



