

Headline: Harlie Bryant spiking her way to lifelong friendship with Western Kentucky volleyball

By Michael J. Lewis

There are so many things children with brain tumors miss out on, but for Harlie Bryant of Beaver Dam, Ky., maybe the worst missed opportunity was having a typical kid's birthday party.

You know, with cake and ice cream and party hats and silly games and friends and everyone gathered around celebrating you. Every child in the world deserves to be king or queen for a day, once a year.

But for a few years in a row, Harlie's big day was shrouded in tough moments. Around her 6th birthday in 2012, she was undergoing chemotherapy as part of her treatment for an optic astrocytoma that had been diagnosed a year earlier.

On her 7th birthday, Harlie again was in and out of recovery and hospitals, ruining what should've been a happy time.

So a few weeks before her 8th birthday, in February, 2014, Harlie's mom, Lisa, was talking to Travis Hudson, the head coach of Western Kentucky women's volleyball, the team that had adopted Harlie in 2012. Once Lisa told Travis what the last few years had been like around her birthday, "I just sprung into action. That was all I needed to hear," Travis recalls.

What followed was an enormous party that blew away the whole Bryant family. Hudson rented out the entire WKU basketball arena and got most Hilltopper athletics teams to attend. There were tie-dyed shirts, a Bouncy House castle, obstacle courses, and more cake than even Marie Antoinette could've ever dreamed of.

"It was amazing, amazing!" Harlie recalls. "I had NO idea they were going to do anything. And everybody was there!"

The huge bash was just one of the many wonderful moments Harlie has experienced with WKU volleyball and coach Hudson, who Lisa calls "part of our family now."

For the past four years, when she has been healthy enough, Harlie has attended WKU games and practices (Beaver Dam is about 40 minutes from WKU's campus in Bowling Green), and had lots of other off-campus get togethers with team members like Ashley Potts and Jessica Lucas.

The team has had sleepover parties at the Bryant home, gone dancing together, and made numerous trips to the hospital when Harlie was undergoing treatments or having surgery.

"The biggest thing this (relationship) has given Harlie is it's allowed her to be a kid sometimes, and not just be a hospital patient," Harlie's father, Jamie, says. "They put a smile on her face and make her forget about all the other stuff in her life, and that's just been incredible for us.

For Travis, getting involved in FOJ meant explaining to his team that this was not going to be a half-commitment, that they'd "all need to really be involved with Harlie's life, now and for the rest of her life."

He even took the step of bringing in a WKU school counselor to talk to the team about dealing with the highs and lows of growing close to a cancer patient.

That advice surely came in handy exactly one year ago, when Harlie suffered a serious stroke. She had to be hospitalized for weeks, and the stroke affected her speech, behavior, and changed her personality.

But throughout the long rehab process, Harlie's volleyball teammates have been there for her. FaceTiming, texting and visiting when they can, the Hilltoppers have done their best to keep the friendship strong.

"School has been really hard for Harlie, because a lot of kids are now scared of her, or don't know how to act around her," Lisa says. "So having the team in her corner, supporting her, has been so huge."

Another volleyball season is right around the corner, and Harlie is hoping she'll be able to attend some games to support "her girls."

"I get really nervous watching, but I love it!" Harlie says. "I just want them to win!"

By being Harlie's friend, they already have.



