

Headline: Two families find Penn State love in “Happy Valley”

By Michael J. Lewis

There are good days and bad days for 6-year-old Gavin Royer, who, like most Friends of Jaclyn adoptees, has had plenty of the former and not enough of the latter.

But every time he gets to see “his boys,” it is unquestionably a good day. He moves his wheelchair a little quicker, smiles a little bit more, and eagerly awaits the afternoon like a kid awaits Santa.

Gavin’s boys are at least 12 years older than him, spend much of their days in a college classroom, and come from all different parts of the country, quite a ways from Gavin’s family home in Morrisdale, Pa.

But for a couple hours every day during the late winter and spring, they get to fulfill their passion of playing lacrosse, and Gavin gets to be there as much as he can.

“When we went for his adoption (on Dec. 3, 2014) they gave Gavin shirts and hats and so much stuff,” says Tiffany Royer, Gavin’s mom. “And Kyle Zittel, one of the captains, told him ‘this is just the start.’ And it was. They’ve been so great, beyond anything we could have hoped for.”

Penn State has done much, much more than just adopt Gavin to the men’s lacrosse team. The Nittany Lions have been one of the most prolific adopters in all of the FOJ family. In addition to Gavin, Penn State adopted his sisters, 12-year-old Victoria and 11-year-old Aliana, to the women’s lacrosse team.

They’ve also welcomed two members of the Benner family; 10-year-old Noah, first diagnosed with a brain tumor in 2012, has been adopted by the football team, while Noah’s sister Sydney, 5, is a proud member of the gymnastics squad (Penn State’s men’s basketball team also has an FOJ adoptee).

“It’s been so uplifting for our kids,” said Noah’s mom, Tiffany Benner. “To see the smile on Noah’s face when he’s around the football team, like, ‘holy cow, I’m actually here with the Penn State football team!’ is so wonderful to see.”

Gavin Royer’s brain tumor came out of nowhere in March of 2014; a perfectly healthy 5-year-old, his mother said he started feeling dizzy one night at his uncle’s house. Later that evening felt sick to his stomach and a few hours later became unresponsive. Rushed to the hospital, Tiffany Royer said they were told Gavin had a “brain bleed,” and after a 7-hour MRI, Tiffany and husband Danny were told their son had an anaplastic ependymoma. Immediate surgery removed 40 percent of the tumor, and Gavin soon underwent seven weeks of chemo and endured 33 radiation treatments, including proton radiation.

Happily, Gavin's last scan in September was clean, with doctors telling the Royers that the tumor had "shrunk tremendously."

Penn State came into their lives during Gavin's treatments at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Learning about the program, Tiffany immediately filled out the application, and heard back from FOJ that Penn State lacrosse was looking to adopt.

"Gavin has been excited the whole time," Tiffany says. "From the first day, when they gave him so much attention, he just ate it up."

The Nittany Lions lacrosse team, led by head coach Jeff Tambroni, have hosted Gavin at practices and games, and welcomed the family to Coach Tambroni's Christmas parties. One player, Billy Lombardi, emails Gavin updates and recaps after road games, and many players quiz Tiffany about Gavin's condition.

"I was truly shocked at how accepting these college boys were of my son, but also how curious they were, asking all kinds of questions about his tumor and his health," Tiffany says.

Victoria and Aliana, Gavin's sisters, were adopted in Dec., 2014 as well, and have become beloved members of the women's lacrosse team. (An assistant coach, Brooke Matthews, was a former Northwestern lacrosse player, the squad that adopted FOJ founder Jaclyn Murphy.)

The Penn State squad has taken the Royer girls bowling, on a team snowtubing event, and recently got a package of team hair bows for their styling pleasure.

"(Players) Jane Truffer and Abby Smucker have been great, they got Victoria and Aliana Alex and Ani FOJ bracelets for Christmas," Tiffany says. "The girls feel completely included in the team."

The Benners have also had good experiences with the Penn State family. Noah was 7 when he was first diagnosed with a tumor; he suffered from a choroid plexus papilloma, a rare tumor that is generally treated with surgery, but without chemo or radiation. Tiffany benner said Noah had two surgeries in 2012 and a third surgery in 2014, which finally (hopefully) rid his brain of the tumors. Noah lost peripheral vision on his left side from the disease, but for the last 18 months he's had nothing but clean scans.

In November, 2014 Noah was adopted by PSU football and new coach James Franklin. Noah was feted with a jersey and a duffel bag filled with PSU gear, and got a helmet signed by the team.

"He gets to go to practice on Wednesday nights and they let him on the field and break the huddle," Tiffany Benner says. "And after the home games he gets to meet the coaches by the buses."

Sydney Benner was adopted a few weeks after her brother, and she's also fallen in love with her team. The gymnastics squad, led by coaches Jeff and Rachele Thompson, has enveloped Sydney with warmth and kindness.

"She gets included in everything they can include her in," Tiffany Benner says. "She's on the mats during practice, she gets introduced with the rest of the team at the meets, and she high-fives all of them when they come off after a routine."

The PSU gymnastics team, led by Emma Sibson, Snapchat with Sydney regularly and keep her smiling "anytime she's around them."

The Benners and Royers have gotten to know each other a little bit through Penn State and FOJ, and are thrilled to be part of the Nittany Lion family.

"The emotional change in Gavin has been so great," Tiffany Royer said. "We're really happy to be involved with Penn State."



Gavin and Noah



Gavin with PSU Women's Lacrosse



Sydney with PSU Gymnastics



Noah, PSU Football