

'The kids have a chance to forget'

Susquehanna Yacht Club gives young cancer patients a day on the river

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Daily Record/Sunday News

York Daily Record/Sunday News

Article Launched:08/05/2007 03:11:49 AM EDT

Aug 5, 2007 — Sylvia Larson knows all too well the challenges faced by families dealing with pediatric cancer patients.

"It's such a stressful time for everyone involved," Larson said. "It's so incredibly tough for the entire family."

Two years ago, Larson's 18-year-old daughter, Jenna, was diagnosed with cancer, and the Palmyra, Lebanon County, family received help from the Four Diamonds Fund while Jenna underwent treatment at Penn State Children's Hospital in Hershey.

The Fund helps families offset the cost of treatment that isn't covered by insurance, along with expenses such as automotive repairs, rent, or household utilities. The Fund also supports the medical team that cares for children and funds pediatric cancer research through start-up grants and the Four Diamonds Pediatric Cancer Research Institute.

The Larsons, members of the Susquehanna Yacht Club in Wrightsville, were so grateful for the assistance of the Four Diamonds Fund, they decided to help give something back.

"Jenna is 20 now, and a student at Penn State," Larson said. "She's doing very well, but once you're a Four Diamonds Family, you're one for life. So we offered up our boat to be used during Four Diamonds Boating Day on the Susquehanna River."

Last year, the Larson family welcomed a mother, father and two boys, one of which was being treated for cancer. The group cruised around the river on Aug. 26.

This year's event, the third such affair, is scheduled for Aug. 18.

Approximately 20 Susquehanna Yacht Club member families will make their powerboats and sailboats available for pediatric cancer patients to enjoy. The club is located at 1730 Long Level Road.

"This is a pretty unique event for us," said Linda Barry, assistant coordinator for the Four Diamonds Fund. "Bassmasters in Harrisburg does a fishing day for us, but this is pretty special because the kids get to do something they otherwise would not be able to do.

"We're very grateful to the Susquehanna Yacht Club, because they go out of their way to accommodate the families as well as the children."

This year's event will feature a picnic lunch, prizes, clowns, and an afternoon of fishing, swimming, sailing, tubing or leisurely cruising on the Susquehanna.

"The best part is that the kids have a chance to forget what's going on for the day," Barry said. "Last year, some of the kids caught a few fish, and members of the yacht club prepared the fish and grilled them up for the kids to eat. Everybody thought that was pretty neat."

According to its Web site, the Four Diamonds Fund has helped more than 2,000 families since 1972, with approximately 90 new families receiving support each year.

"We have families on what's called 'active treatment,' meaning the kids are receiving chemotherapy either through IVs or orally," Barry said. "We sent a letter out to those families, letting them know about the event.

"All of the kids are at different phases of their treatment. Some might not feel well enough to go on the boats. Others who are further down the line are more inclined to go."

Larson, one of this year's primary event organizers, said Susquehanna Yacht Club members really enjoy spending time with the cancer patients and their families, which helps explain the generous donations of food,

money and time.

"I think they experience a feeling of reward for doing something good for the families," Larson said. "This is the third year, and we have patients and their families asking to pair up again with the same boat.

"Our members enjoy seeing how well the children have progressed, and they keep in touch throughout the years."

Since the Four Diamonds Fund's inception, the patient outcomes have improved dramatically, too.

"In the 1970s, the Fund patients' cure rate was 50 percent or less," Barry said. "Now it's 80-85 percent, depending on the type of cancer.

"Our support is more than just financial. It's emotional. And now families know they aren't alone in this. Knowing that people are behind them does so much for the family in coping with the illness, and events like the boat outing does wonders for the kids, too."

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