

Local Story of Hope

3-year-old Kate Pittenger



One day in so much pain she couldn't move and the next a seemingly normal three-year-old, Kate proves kids get arthritis, too.

The Pittenger family is ready to get off the roller coaster they've ridden for the past two years, but the cart keeps circling the track.

The ride started in June 2004 when the babysitter called to tell Brad and Carrie that their daughter, Kate, was experiencing pain and stiffness in her neck. Initially the couple assumed Kate just had a stiff neck and the pain would go away on its own or with some Advil.

When the Pittenger's returned home they found their daughter sitting on the babysitter's lap in excruciating pain—any slight movement evoked screams of agony.

The days that followed were topsy-turvy. For weeks, every other day Kate would be fine and didn't complain of any pain.

Kate stumped the pediatricians and specialists. After multiple x-rays, blood tests, ct scans, spinal taps and MRIs, doctors still couldn't pinpoint what was wrong with her.

"Her symptoms were not normal, but weren't remarkable either," Brad said.

Kate's pain got to the point that she couldn't be left with the babysitter. Every other day Brad or Carrie alternated staying home with their daughter.

While doctors circled around Kate's diagnosis, codeine, anti-inflammatory medicines and Valium were prescribed to help lessen her unbearable pain.

Then the first glimpse of hope surfaced for the Pittenger family June 26 when their older daughter, Elizabeth, went to a birthday party. The father of the birthday girl happened to be a pediatric neurosurgeon. After Carrie talked with him, the doctor agreed to take a look at Kate's records and test results.

The doctor noticed she had an instability of the spine and soon prescribed a neck collar to alleviate her pain. He feared the instability in her spine could make her more susceptible to spinal injury—a hit or fall could leave her a quadriplegic. Kate did almost everything in her neck collar because for the first time in months she was comfortable.

Soon after, the family went on vacation and she was able to wear the collar less and less frequently until finally she was able to completely stop wearing it.

It seemed the end of the roller coaster ride was drawing near.

However, on Halloween, the pain returned—the cart barreling faster than ever around the corners of the track.

Soon the pain spread to her extremities. Her hands hurt so bad that Kate would ask her parents to feed her. Her fingers soon resembled little sausages. The neurosurgeon recommended they go down and see a rheumatologist who knew instantly Kate suffered from Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis, a disease that attacks the lining of joints in the body and can cause permanent joint damage.

She had arthritis in nearly every joint. The rheumatologist even shared the case with students because she had symptoms they may never see again, especially in someone so young and he wanted to be sure if they did they would recognize them.

The doctor started Kate on an intense cocktail of drugs such as Methotrexate, Remicade, Naprosyn and Prednisone to reduce the swelling and reduce the pain. The medications worked great but a string of side effects shortly followed with her chance of such things as lymphoma and liver damage increasing significantly. Kate's immune system was also suppressed from the medications so she catches nearly every flu or cold virus she comes in contact with.

The Pittenger's hope to get to the point that they can back off of the medications. But until the roller coaster finally comes to a halt they are focusing on continuing her quality of life with medication instead of taking her off the medications for fear of the increased risk of developing other diseases.

Soon after Kate was diagnosed, the Pittenger's became active with the Arthritis Foundation of Eastern Missouri that they believe has helped them tremendously.

Two years ago, the Pittenger's started a team for the Arthritis Walk called Kate's Crusaders which has helped raise nearly \$15,000 for the Chapter. Kate was named the Arthritis Foundation 2006 Honoree. Brad currently serves on the board and was honored to be asked to serve as the 2007 Walk chair.

"We had no idea kids got arthritis," Brad said. "And we didn't realize how impactful it was...it wasn't an awareness in our lives."

The national web site has proved invaluable to them. Message boards remind the Pittenger's they are not the only family suffering and provide a wealth of information as well as contact with other parents going through similar situations.

"You have to know you aren't alone," Brad said. "There are other parents out there going through the same thing. Others can help; you just might have to reach out and ask."

