

Sick kids have Pal in Lynch

Collecting stuffed critters for WVU Children's Hospital

BY TRACY EDDY *The Dominion Post*

DONATIONS of new stuffed animals or money for Jessi's Pals can be made at Clear Mountain Bank locations in Monongalia and Preston counties. Info: call WVU Children's Hospital at 598-4346 or visit wvkids.com.

A variety of stuffed animals swallowed up tabletops and were piled around a podium in the WVU Children's Hospital playroom, where former prisoner of war Jessica Lynch announced "Jessi's Pals," a project to collect new stuffed animals for the hospital's patients.

The mission of the program is to provide a stuffed pal to every child treated at WVU Children's Hospital — more than 7,000 children a year hailing from every county of West Virginia, and the surrounding states of Pennsylvania, Maryland and Ohio.

Lynch, a native of Palestine, Wirt County, is the former Army private first class who was rescued after nine days of captivity during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003.

Lynch said she still remembers the first stuffed animal she got while she was recovering in Germany — a teddy bear. She carried it around with her, comforted by its presence, because it meant someone cared for her and hoped for her healing.

"I can personally say how a little bit of kindness goes a long way," Lynch said.

After her homecoming, Lynch received various cards and letters from children, telling her to get better, and not to give up. These well-wishes were especially encouraging, she said.

"That experience kind of reinforced my connection to kids, and that connection is a driving force behind my involvement with WVU Children's Hospital," Lynch said.

Becoming a mother has also deepened her connection to children. She said having her daughter, 7-month-old Dakota Ann, is one of the best things she's ever done.

Terri Elder, of Irwin, Pa. — her daughter, Holly, 7, is a patient — said she can relate, and she thinks the supply of stuffed animals is a great idea.

"A stuffed animal is a kid's closest thing when they need something to comfort them," Elder said.

Dr. Giovanni Piedimonte, chair of WVU's department of pediatrics, said the program is an excellent addition to the state-of-the-art subspecialties and services already offered at WVU Children's Hospital, and he can think of no better person than Jessica Lynch to chair it.

"We really work for the future of this state — the children — and Jessica's a child of West Virginia. She summarizes the best qualities of the people in the state of West Virginia, which are courage and generosity," Piedimonte said.

Cheryl Jones, director of WVU Children's Hospital, said the stuffed animals will provide the patients with an environment that's less frightening, and decrease their stress.

"We want to allow kids to do what they do best, and that's play," Jones said.

In addition to Lynch's donation of more than 50 stuffed animals, she also pledged \$1,000 to WVU Children's Hospital from her Jessica Lynch Foundation.

Lynch received a plaque for chairing the initiative. The plaque features a message reading, "Thanks for giving a helping hand," and an imprint of children's hands.

Lynch and Children's Hospital staff hope this initiative will encourage others to get involved. "Come to the hospital and do whatever you can to put a smile on these kids' faces," Lynch said. The goal is for the program to expand to feature more drop-off locations around the state.

WVU Children's Hospital is on the sixth floor of Ruby Memorial Hospital. It includes a pediatric and adolescent unit, a Pediatric Intensive Care Unit, a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, a suite of 25 labor-delivery-post-partum rooms for the mother and infant, and an activity room and a teen room as part of its Child Life Program.

During her visit to Children's Hospital, Lynch was surprised by a familiar face, Dr. Robert Johnstone, an anesthesiologist with WVU Hospitals. Johnstone serves with the U.S. Army Reserve, and was called to duty at the Walter Reed Medical Center in March 2003. He administered anesthesia to Lynch for two of her surgeries while there.

"It's an incredibly small world, and it's just really nice to see Jessica," Johnstone said.

Come fall, Lynch will start up the second term of her sophomore year at the WVU campus in Parkersburg. She'll said she'll be juggling motherhood and school, with a major in elementary education.



Ron Rittenhouse/The Dominion Post photos

Jessica Lynch (above) looks through a book with Holly Elder, 7, of New Huntington, Pa., at WVU Children's Hospital on Wednesday. Lynch was there to promote Jessi's Pals, a project to collect new stuffed animals for the hospital. Lynch, a former Iraq war POW, smiles (left) as Dr. Robert Johnston stops by to see her. He was her anesthesiologist at Walter Reed Hospital for two surgeries, and she remembered his face.

