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Dog days

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Three-year-old Chiquita sports a perpetual grin, a jaunty walk and a long, fluffy tail with a mind of its own, clearly focused on wagging. She's a Cavalier King Charles spaniel, a Canine Therapy Corps volunteer in the Pediatric Oncology Unit at Advocate Lutheran General Children's Hospital, in Park Ridge.

Early in August, she provided some welcome entertainment for oncology patient Sara Martorano, 4, and her parents, Joe and Erin, of Chicago's Norwood Park community, as they waited for test results. A one-girl dog show, Chiquita twirled, high-fived and wove figure eights around the legs of her owner, Barb Brightman, of Chicago. She played the shell game, too.

"To qualify as a therapy dog, Chiquita had to pass a rigorous 14-point test on obedience and temperament," said Janet Eaton, executive director of CTC, based in Chicago. "Today, we're here as a diversion."

Sara's story

The Martoranos probably needed a diversion. Last November, Sara was diagnosed with Stage IV nephroblastoma/Wilms' tumor, a kidney cancer that strikes about 500 children annually in the United States. Most are younger than 5. Sara's parents had little advance warning.

"She had a few bouts of fever and nausea -- nothing more," Erin Martorano said. "By the time the tumor on her left kidney was apparent to anyone, it was 8 inches long, and the cancer had metastasized to her liver."

Under the care of Dr. William Goodell and Dr. Jong-Hyo Kwon, LGCH's pediatric oncologists, Sara's left kidney was removed. In all, she endured three surgeries, 33 weeks of chemotherapy and 12 sessions of radiation.

"The doctors here have been amazing," Joe Martorano said.

Sara sat on the floor of the examining room and played hawker to Chiquita's mark, carefully concealing a cheese cracker under one of three plastic cups. Finding it was no problem for Chiquita, who boasts a 100-percent success record at the shell game.

"What's the best part of having cancer?" Erin Martorano teased.

"Junk food," Sara replied. "I can eat all I want."

"Thank goodness her favorite food is fresh fruit," added Joe Martorano, a Chicago police officer.

Dogs from CTC work with children getting chemotherapy, too.

"I've seen IV-chemotherapy patients walking our dogs in small circles in their rooms," Brightman said. "Their moms are following close behind, pushing their IV poles."

Sara was too tired to walk Chiquita down the hallway, but she wasn't too tired to talk. As she stroked the little spaniel, she chattered happily about Hannah Montana and the Jonas Brothers.

A student at White Steeple Pre-School in Norwood Park, Sara talked about her brand new Hannah Montana backpack and her monkey lunchbox and thermos. She said she likes to ride her bike, but since her

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diagnosis, she's been restricted to riding in the house. She also enjoys playing with Lucky, her family's golden retriever, and with her sisters, Anna, 2, and Mary, 6, she said.

"I sing and dance a lot at home," Sara said. "Mary's a really awful singer."

Puppylove

After some high-fives and a few hugs and kisses, Chiquita snoozed on her owner's feet, while Sara looked at her new CTC trading card. The front of the card has Chiquita's picture on it. She's wearing her official blue CTC jacket. The back of the card lists Chiquita facts: her favorite food -- peanut butter; her favorite toys -- tennis balls; and her favorite pastime -- chasing lizards at her winter home in Puerto Rico.

"That's the first question her sister, Mary, will ask when we get home," Erin Martorano said, smiling. "Which dog did you get to meet today?"

Canine therapy dogs from CTC were working in Pediatric Physical Therapy at LGCH when nurse Sue Shivley, practice manager in the Pediatric Oncology Unit, suggested they'd be valuable with her young cancer patients, too. The program was expanded to the Pediatric Oncology Unit several months ago. Staff, patients and families report it's been an unqualified success.

"I'm just a dog lover," Shivley said.

Dogs from Rainbow Animal Assisted Therapy, of Morton Grove, also work at Lutheran General. They participate in therapy and make visits on request to patients in the children's hospital and the main hospital, even in intensive care units.

It's not exactly true that Lutheran General is going to the dogs -- at least not yet. But they're working on it.

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