

YOUR FAMILY



Meet the COLLINS FAMILY

BY JILL I. SOLLIMINI

The Collins
family at home



Maya and Annabella Collins mix up cookies in the kitchen. PHOTOS BY DEOGRACIAS LERMA

Sisters share with those in need, receive back in kind

Cancer touches the lives of everyone, and when it touched the lives of Maya and Annabella Collins their first response was to help.

In the summer of 2010, the sisters decided to host a lemonade stand and donate their proceeds to the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society (LLS) to help a neighbor who was battling lymphoma. In February of 2011, Annabella made the generous decision to donate money from her own piggy bank to an LLS fundraiser to honor Hannah Berryman, a close friend of hers who had battled leukemia.

Only a few months later, cancer touched the Collins family in a way they never imagined. Second grader Maya, who had not been feeling well for weeks, was diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukemia (AML). She was admitted into Children's Hospital where she spent six months and three days undergoing a rigorous treatment course

that included a bone marrow transplant.

With no extended family living locally, parents Tom and Bonnie were stretched thin, taking turns staying at the hospital with Maya around the clock. Family and friends rallied, the Mason community heard the news, and the family was immediately showered with the same generosity Anna-



One of Maya's many paintings

bella and Maya had previously demonstrated.

"We were overwhelmed by the support of family, friends, neighbors and even people we didn't know," says Tom.

Grandparents took turns staying with

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YOUR FAMILY

The dining room has a tray ceiling and heavy wood accents.





The kitchen of the Collins home features an island, a bar with seating, and granite countertops.

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the family for weeks at a time, friends set up a schedule to provide the family with dinners every other night for the entire six-month hospital stay, and long-time friends the Lichtenbergs, owners of Lichtenberg Landscaping, took over the care of their yard.

Tom and Bonnie's parents also took Annabella back to their homes which gave her the much needed break she needed over the summer months. She was able to spend quality time with her grandparents in St. Louis, Tennessee and North Carolina.

"We also received numerous gift cards for groceries and gas from so many people," says Bonnie. "It was amazing."

In May, family friends organized a bone marrow drive through the Be the Match Registry at the Abuelos restaurant in Deerfield Towne Center. They signed up an

» DONATE

You can donate to Team in Training by visiting www.teamintraining.org, clicking on donate, and entering Lori Aronson or Heather Sampson where it asks for a name. To purchase Maya's artwork, go to www.mayagraccollins.com to visit the Magnificent Maya Fund.

amazing 296 people as bone marrow donors at the event.

During the summer, the family was contacted by the Dragonfly Foundation, an organization that works in partnership with Children's Hospital to provide distractions that help ease the pain and fear children dealing with these illnesses face. Their goal is to bring comfort and joy to kids with cancer, and they presented Maya with gifts every few weeks during her stay in the hospital.

In order to help keep all the people who care about Maya in the loop, Tom and Bonnie set up a Caringbridge, a personalized website that allows families to update friends and family instantly. Bonnie took on the sometimes daily task of writing heartfelt messages about Maya's long journey.

"She developed almost a cult following," says Tom. "People told us they needed a daily dose of knowing how Maya was doing."

"We received messages of support from people we knew and from people we didn't even know," says Bonnie. "It really kept us going during those long months in the hospital."

"Throughout it all, Bonnie showed her strength," says Tom. "You have to rise to the occasion when something like this happens, and she did."

"Tom's priorities changed. Work became less important," says Bonnie. "Often it's the mom who stays with the child most of the

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A staircase descends into the living room, which features extensive bookshelves. Below, one of the girl's bedrooms.

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time, but Tom and I spent every other night with Maya. Even the nurses commented on how much time he spent in the hospital."

Tom and Bonnie can't say enough about the care that Maya received at Children's Hospital.

"We are so blessed to be close to Children's," says Bonnie. "We saw so many people from all over the country and the world there. It was so hard for them because they had to be away from their families for such long periods of time."

After meeting some of the nurses who cared for her sister, fifth grader Annabella is now considering nursing as a career.

"Some of the nurses had leukemia and some knew someone who had it," says Annabella. "They want to help people who have it now."

"The nurses were wonderful," says





Bonnie. "They were great with Maya, and they were always amazed at what an easy patient she was."

Maya has been incredibly strong through the long process in the hospital and during her recovery back at home. She keeps busy with Barbies, computer time and some television or Wii. She looks forward to Annabella's return from school each day and to her tutoring sessions with Mason Heights third grade teacher Shannon Woodruff.

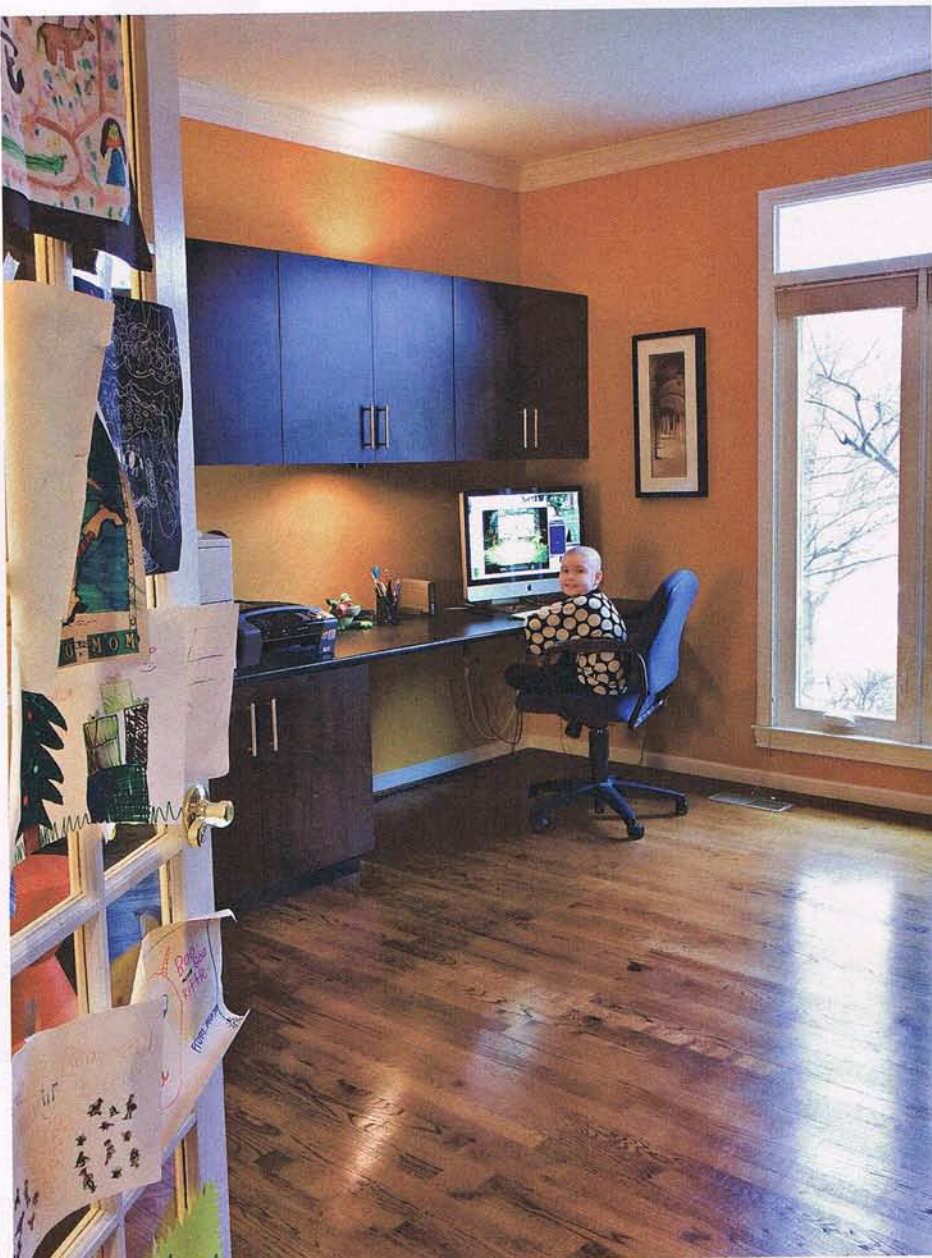
When Shannon, who had been Annabella's teacher, heard about Maya, she immediately volunteered to tutor her. Mondays through Thursdays, after putting in a full day with her class, Shannon comes to the Collins home and spends an hour and a half tutoring Maya. If Maya is well enough to head back to school this spring, she will have a place in Shannon's class.

"Shannon goes above and beyond. What she does for Maya is just another example of the many kindnesses people have shown us," says Bonnie.

Bonnie and Tom are committed to spreading the word about childhood cancers and continue to post on Maya's Caring-bridge website. They also have a facebook page called Caring for Collins that posts information about Maya's progress as well as ways to get involved. Recent information included a link to a petition you can sign to encourage Mattel to make a Beautiful and Bald Barbie and information on the Be the Match bone marrow registry, the organization responsible for finding Maya's bone marrow donor.

Her donor, a young nursing student, has become Maya's pen pal, and Maya hopes to meet her one day.

This spring, Maya will be one of the



Maya plays in the office, above. At top left, another view of the living room.

honorary heroes for a local Team in Training group that is competing in the Flying Pig Marathon in May. Team in Training, part of the LLS, has trained over half a million athletes and raised over \$1.2 billion to fund lifesaving research. Dawn Berryman, Hannah's mother, will compete as part of the team and has already reached her goal of \$7,600.

Lori Aronson and Heather Sampson, close friends of Bonnie's, are working toward raising \$5,750 for the LLS competing as members of Team in Training in a race in Madrid to honor Maya. They had Maya create five paintings that local artist Kathy Hyatt transferred to different mediums including canvas, garden stones, flower pots, notecards and posters that will be sold

at various fundraisers. Bonnie hopes to continue selling the pieces online and at boutiques and art festivals to continue raising money for leukemia research.

Today, Bonnie and Tom are focusing on their family and on getting Maya's strength back. She is now in remission and has high hopes of returning to school soon. Life is forever changed, but the family sees much that is positive.

"We see what's really important now," says Bonnie. "Health, family and friends."

"We don't sweat the little things anymore," says Tom. "And we don't take anything for granted."

"No, we don't take anything for granted anymore," agrees Annabella, throwing Maya a sweet smile. "Even hair."