

What A Wish Hero!

Marlee Phillips inspires cyclists to raise Wish funds thanks to her will to overcome serious impairments.

Belinda Phillips, a Bloomfield Hills lawyer who formerly worked for the Michigan Court of Appeals, is working on a book about patient advocacy. The mother of two daughters also is an inspiration to people who truly care about kids with special needs. She has a healthy daughter, Alyssa, 18, who will attend Brandeis University this fall. Meanwhile, Marlee, 16, was diagnosed with tuberous sclerosis at birth, juvenile diabetes at 13 and osteoporosis at 15. She attends Lamphere Center, a centered program in Madison Heights for students with cognitive/physical impairments.

Meeting Marlee quickly gives you pause when you think simple setbacks are all that important. Marlee reinforced for me one of life's chief lessons: setting an example for others, even as impairments take their toll, helps make the world a better — and richer — place. Marlee is a real gift. Belinda and her daughters are members of Temple Israel and active at Friendship Circle, both in West Bloomfield.

— Robert Sklar, editor

Belinda Phillips

Special to the Jewish News

Team Alex gets it. Team Alex is a group of about 70 cyclists who train all year to ride in the Wish-A-Mile event for the Make-A-Wish Foundation of Michigan. Riding 300 miles in three days from Traverse City to Chelsea is a feat in and of itself; in these difficult times, Team Alex raised \$211,000 this year.

My children and I were fortunate to experience the love and respect of the members of Team Alex over the last year, culminating in the July 23-25 Wish-A-Mile fundraising event. My daughter Marlee was honored to be a Wish Hero for Team Alex. Along with veteran Wish child Lily Upp of Berkley, Marlee placed medals on many of the riders as they completed the amazing benefit ride. It was an emotional experience for all of us.

Many of the riders told Marlee that when they felt that they could not continue, they looked down at her name on their wristband as inspiration. The riders had tears in their eyes as Marlee handed out the medals and planted kisses on their cheek. Everyone hugged us and thanked me for taking such good care of Marlee. Yes, Team Alex gets it. The outpouring of love from the members of Team Alex was unexpected and indescribable.

The Alex Factor

Team Alex was started by Beth Brandvain of Farmington Hills as a tribute to the life of Alex Graham, a beautiful 17-year-old girl who lost her struggle with cancer in 1999. When Alex, daughter of Susie and Bill Graham of West Bloomfield, was going through her treatment,

she received a unique wish from the Make-A-Wish Foundation: She wanted to raise awareness by way of a Public Service Announcement so children involved in cancer treatment would be treated with dignity and respect.

Alex and her family had experienced the uncomfortable stares and the intolerance often felt by someone with serious health issues. Years later, Alex's parents tirelessly continue to support the efforts of Team Alex and the Make-A-Wish Foundation. Within a few moments of meeting them, I was in awe of their positive outlook on life, perhaps inspired by their daughter.

Beyond The Bikes

I contacted Make-A-Wish a few years ago and we were embraced with open arms. When Marlee's wish arrived, she was so excited. "Bike ... bike," she shouted happily as she pointed at two shiny new bikes, an adaptive tricycle that she could ride on her own and a buddy bike, a special tandem bike that she could ride with me.

A few days after Marlee received her wish, we ran into Beth Brandvain. I had met Beth and Team Alex teammates Dorothy Barak, DeDe Robinson and Susie Graham through their volunteer activities at Friendship Circle in West Bloomfield.

When our conversation turned to bike riding, Beth told me she was involved in the Wish-A-Mile event and Team Alex. She asked whether Marlee would be a Wish Hero the following summer for Team Alex. We were honored.

Marlee was diagnosed with a genetic disorder (tuberous sclerosis) when she was born. It has caused seizures that have been

impossible to control despite trials on every medication available in the world and numerous brain surgeries attempting to find the focus of her seizures. The seizures have affected Marlee's development and her motor skills. She works hard at school and in her therapies to gain as many skills as she can. Tuberous sclerosis has also caused tumors to grow on many of her organs. Thankfully, the tumors are benign. One of the tumors on a kidney grew so quickly that she had to have one of her kidneys removed a few years ago.

Six months after that, Marlee was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes. Now, she has to deal with the high and low glucose levels that occur with diabetes as well as many needle pokes throughout the day. Shortly after that, osteoporosis was diagnosed. Her difficult journey continues. Yet, through all of this, Marlee's beautiful spirit, contagious laugh, happy disposition and loving personality shine through.

The hardest part of this journey for us has been the isolation that we often experience. When we go out in the community, we are often met with stares until people become familiar with Marlee and realize what a sweet child she is. As you might expect, some people never see her beauty and are intolerant of her differences. The tangible gifts that Make-A-Wish gives the children are amazing!

What we appreciate even more is how good it feels to have people show kindness and compassion during some of the difficult times.

Yes, Team Alex gets it! □

View Alex's PSA at teamalexrides.org. Also order Team Alex's calendar *Barely Team Alex 2010* there.



Team Alex rider Dori Leib of Farmington Hills with Marlee Phillips at the Chelsea Fairgrounds at the end of the 2009 Wish-A-Mile benefit ride.



Marlee Phillips enjoys riding her specially made bike.