

A Sparkle for Isiah

A scared mom, a sick child and an unexpected source of comfort

By JULIEN WARREN, PLAINVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS

ISIAH, MY EIGHT-YEAR-OLD, couldn't get up from his hospital bed because of the tube in his nose. He didn't want to read. Or watch TV. Or play with his action figures. I turned on my laptop and pulled up his favorite game site. "Isiah, want to see if there are any new games?" I asked.

He barely glanced at the screen. Not even a spark in his eyes. That's how down he was and my heart sank with him. Maybe if this had been his first trip to the hospital I might have been able to distract him. I would have shown him how to make the bed go up and down, how to buzz the nurses. But it was all old news. Though the situation was nowhere near as dire this time, he was upset to be back. I knew how he felt. I was trying to fight off my own fears, but my mind kept going back to the ordeal we went through.

It all started four years earlier with

Isiah running around the house with his older brother, Xavier, and tripping on the stairs. It wasn't a bad fall. All I could find was a small bruise, yet Isiah kept clutching his stomach. I took him to the ER. No one could figure out what the problem was. Then he got a sonogram. All the color drained from the doctor's face. "Your son has a large mass on his kidney," he said. "You need to go to Westchester Medical Center immediately. They have an excellent pediatric oncology department."

I called my husband, Reggie, at work. I called my mom. I probably seemed organized. Inside I was in turmoil, raging at God. *I make sure the boys eat healthy, exercise, get checkups. How could you let this happen? He's only four!*

Isiah was too young to understand what was happening. All he knew was the needles for blood tests and shots hurt. He wouldn't let me out of his sight. If I had to go to the restroom, I waited

until he dozed off. At night I tried to grab what sleep I could in the foldout chair by his bed.

Since we had family and friends all over—Reggie had relatives in Jamaica—I started a blog, Hope4Isiah, to keep everyone updated. The mass was a tumor so large that it crushed Isiah's kidney. The kidney had to come out along with the tumor. Surgery took eight hours. "Thanks for your support and prayers," I wrote. I steeled myself for the pathology report.

"Stage three," the oncologist said. Something called Wilms tumor, a type of childhood kidney cancer. It had spread to Isiah's lymph nodes. Months of radiation and chemo lay ahead. My imagination raced, thinking about the future. It was too much to take in. I could barely process it. *Oh, Lord, please be with us every step of the way, I beg you.*

▶ Watch another family tell their story at guideposts.org/comfortkit



IMAGINE HE WAS YOUR CHILD Isiah can write about what he's feeling in the Comfort Kit journal from Guideposts Outreach.

When Reggie made it to the hospital we went into the hall to talk. "They have to put a port in his chest for the chemo," I said. "That means another surgery, more medicine and more time here at the hospital. I don't know if I can take it anymore. Isiah is so scared they have to hold him down whenever he gets a shot. *I'm so scared. Pretty soon they'll have to hold me down.*" Reggie took me in his arms and held me tight.

"I know, honey," he said. "But you're not alone. We'll get through this."

Somehow we *did* get through it. The months of chemo and radiation, the trips back and forth to the hospital, the waiting for test results. And prayer results. The treatments wiped Isiah out. When his hair fell out, all those beautiful curls, I turned my head and cried.

Blogging kept me going. People posted messages and prayers daily.

PHOTOS BY JULIE BROWN HARWOOD

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Still, all I really wanted was for life to go back to normal. Finally our prayers were answered. “Isiah had a sonogram and chest X-ray and we got the results,” I wrote. “My baby boy is healthy!”

“WE ARE DONE,” I typed in all caps, though I wouldn’t have been surprised if everyone could hear me shouting for joy. “No more scary hospitals. Woohoooo!”

We took a family trip to Jamaica and went to the church where Reggie’s grandparents had worshipped. A couple we had never met greeted us warmly, as though they knew us. “This must be Isiah,” the woman said, putting her hand on his curly hair. “It is so wonderful to see him looking well. We were praying for him.”

“You were?” I said. That’s why this couple welcomed us like they knew us... because in a way, they did. They knew us through their prayers. It’s amazing how God connects us and cares for us, sometimes in ways we could never dream. And at times we could never expect.

NOW HERE WE WERE, back at the hospital, and I found myself wishing for that kind of reassurance. At least this time we weren’t on the oncology ward. Isiah had an intestinal blockage, the result of scar tissue from his cancer surgery, that the doctors could fix fairly routinely. But nothing about being hospitalized is routine to a child, or his mother.

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HEALTHY AND HAPPY Julien, Reggie and their sons, Xavier and Isiah

“Excuse me,” said a voice from the doorway. A woman holding a bright blue box. She introduced herself as the hospital chaplain. “Hi, Isiah,” she said. “I have something here for you.”

She sat by his bed and opened the blue box that said “Comfort Kit” on it from Guideposts Outreach. Isiah perked up and peered into the box. Inside were stickers, crayons, a book, a journal and a stuffed toy in the shape of a star. “That’s Sparkle the star,” the chaplain said.

“Isiah, what do you say?” I said.

“Thank you.” He picked up the star and held it close. All at once a smile stretched across his face, the first smile I’d seen in days. The kind of smile that chases away fear. “You don’t know how much this means to me,” I said to the chaplain. “How much it means to us both. It was as if you were an answer to...”

We would get through this hospital stay just fine. I could tell by the sparkle in my son’s eyes. 