

A Village Springs Up to Heal a Child

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Richard Perry/The New York Times

Scott Kennedy and Suzan Mikiel with their son, Hazen, who has cancer. A network of neighbors is aiding the family.

This is a story of hope, one born of a love that is true, deep and mad. It starts with Suzan Mikiel and Scott Kennedy, young actors who were raised in Michigan but met in New York. They married and had a child. The boy, Hazen, is this precious, impish creature known to all in the playgrounds of Hell's Kitchen.



Scott Kennedy, Suzan Mikiel and Hazen at home in Hell's Kitchen. Friends renovated the apartment, and cleaned the outer hallways to protect Hazen's weakened immune system.

And last year, his third, doctors found he had cancer.

"The doctor said it directly," Scott recalled. "I'll never forget. He said, 'Your son has cancer.' As soon as I heard that, I thought, I'm dead. We couldn't think or do anything."

But remember, this is a story of hope, the kind we grasp onto during this, our sad season. Within hours of hearing those chilling words, the Kennedys found themselves surrounded by friends.

They were joined by a growing network of acquaintances and even total strangers who took turns cooking meals, renovating their ramshackle apartment or just watching over Hazen as he slept, to make sure he didn't tug at the tubes that sustained him during the worst moments in the hospital.

This is a story of one boy, much love and a group of people who refused to shrink away in indifference or despair. Some of them had crossed paths and never even exchanged a nod or a word. But now they are bound by a simple vow: We can do this.

"What's really amazing is, a lot of time there is a crisis and people show up in the beginning and then they drift off," said Carey Crim, a childhood friend of Suzan's who was the first person to rush to the hospital last November. "God forbid if something happens, they show up at the end. This is a group of people who have not wavered."

The parents of Hazen's classmates at the Manhattan Plaza preschool knew that any of them could have been standing dumbstruck in the hospital. Chris and Margaret Murphy, whose son, Gearód, is Hazen's best friend, scheduled people to stay with the family every day during their vigil at Mount Sinai Hospital's pediatric intensive care unit.

The group took over a corner of the waiting room. They had a binder filled with phone numbers. Whenever Scott emerged with some technical tidbit about Hazen's neuroblastoma - a cancer affecting the nervous system - the group would dash home and do quick research on the Internet.

But just as important was the human touch.

"When Hazen was intubated, we needed two people there with him," Ms. Murphy said. "You would just sit there and rub his hair. We'd tell his parents: 'It's time for you to take a shower. Go home.'"

Carolyn Montgomery and her partner, Lea Forant, volunteered to cook meals - and not some mystery meat with cream soup concoction, but honest-to-goodness organic meals. The couple did this even though they had an infant son, and were starting a cafe and catering business.

Ms. Montgomery chuckles at how she first met the Kennedys; years ago when she was thinking of starting her own family, she befriended Suzan and offered to baby-sit for Hazen. Now she wants to hire him at the cafe when he turns 14.

"Suzan and Scott are as positive, intelligent and philosophical as two people could be," Ms. Montgomery said. "They are not ignoring the big picture. But they are concentrating on the miracle. If it could happen to anybody, it could happen to them."

Laura Gottlieb Feldman now coordinates the meals, which are prepared and paid for by others. She had known the Kennedys only tangentially, through her husband's college roommate. When Hazen took ill, she went to the hospital and kept the family company one night. They were good friends of a good friend of hers, and they needed help. She soon learned more.

"At 3 a.m., Scott comes to where I am sitting and said, 'I know you, your son is Max, and your baby sitter would come to the playground where Hazen and I played with him,' " she said. "He told me stuff they did, like how they'd go down the slide together. I never knew this. How small a world this is, this man I never met, now I am in the hospital with him, and he knew my son."

Hazen now is in the middle of an 18-month outpatient treatment at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. His hair is downy soft and wispy from the chemotherapy. His next operation is scheduled for Sept. 26. On the streets of Hell's Kitchen, people sport baby blue plastic bracelets that read HK Strong. The letters stand for Hazen Kennedy or Hell's Kitchen. Take your pick.

Marisa Redanty, the president of the Manhattan Plaza tenant association, the site of Hazen's preschool, persuaded some friends to pony up the cash to make the bracelets, which are sold in places like Mr. Biggs for \$5, and can be obtained through a Web site that friends set up for Hazen: www.amazinhazen.org.