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Olive Branch recognizes rare condition of young resident

Toni Lepaska

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Oct. 18, 2013 — Haylie Wallace listens as Olive Branch Mayor Scott Phillips reads a proclamation recognizing October as Dysautonomia Awareness Month. Wallace, a freshman at Olive Branch High School, suffers from the rare disease. The city is one of three local governments nationally to make such a proclamation. (Stan Carroll/The Commercial Appeal)

Haylie Wallace's young life was upended when she began to pass out at school and at home, and doctors were not sure why or how to stop the attacks.

She suffered chest pains and wild fluctuations in blood pressure. She had to be revived by a principal, by an uncle, by paramedics that rushed in to help.

Doctors gave her an inhaler, but her condition worsened. They sent her to a neurologist but he didn't find a problem. They performed a "tilt test" on her. She was sent home and told to get stress counseling and practice yoga.

And worse yet, the kids at school thought she was pretending. Maybe she just wanted attention.

"You really feel alone," 14-year-old Haylie said.

Haylie is alone no more. She was surrounded Friday by dozens of supporters, including paramedics who have helped her during attacks, as Mayor Scott Phillips read a proclamation “in honor and support of Haylie” at City Hall.

Phillips proclaimed October to be Dysautonomia Month in Olive Branch, only the third city this year to recognize the illness through a proclamation.

It’s a long word that Haylie has become accustomed to pronouncing. Last fall, she finally got a diagnosis that fit her symptoms.

Haylie’s nervous system doesn’t know how to act sometimes. While the condition affects more than the heart, it is the rhythm of that organ that threatened her life.

In November, a pacemaker was put into her chest to regulate her heart. She was only 13.

She still has symptoms, but she’s improved. She will travel to Jackson soon for more testing and perhaps surgery.

Haylie, who is now home-schooled through the DeSoto County Schools system, is the only daughter of Lori Wallace, a nurse who quit work to take care of Haylie, and David Wallace, an Olive Branch alderman and FedEx employee.

Haylie was a normal preteen when she first started showing obvious symptoms of something being amiss in June 2010.

She began passing out so frequently that she had to stay home for school. The idea of driving in a few years was out of the question.

“These past few years have been really hard for me because of the continuous doctor’s appointments and hospital visits,” Haylie said, “but the worst part of it was the bullying and how I was treated by kids at school. And even a lot of the doctors I went to treated me like I was crazy and nothing was really wrong with me.”

The Wallaces received a diagnosis at Trinity Medical Center in Birmingham.

Over time, Haylie has educated herself about dysautonomia, a defect of the autonomic system that controls unconscious bodily functions like the heart rate. Not a whole lot of people have the condition but she’s found a few on the Internet.

Dysautonomia International is prompting people to ask for proclamations from officials to raise awareness of the disease. Lori Wallace asked Olive Branch’s mayor to make a proclamation and keep it a secret before time from Haylie.

Haylie thought she was going to City Hall on Friday to honor the paramedics who have repeatedly helped her during an attack. She brought handmade wooden hearts with the “Haylie’s Hero” painted on them.

She planned to ask the mayor then to issue a proclamation.

The jig was up when Haylie walked into the rotunda and saw her brother, who was supposed to be at school.

Surrounded by supporters, she read from a statement prepared as a message for the paramedics.

“I felt like you all were the only people besides my family who cared,” she said, tears on her face. “I consider you all heroes in my battle with dysautonomia.”

For more information about dysautonomia, visit dysautonomiainternational.org.