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The fight of her life

Fourth grader bears diabetes with a smile

By Laura Kenyon
Editor

Asking nine-year-old Ashley Dunnam about her diabetes is like asking a teenage girl about her favorite Jonas brother — she folds in on herself slightly, gets nervously quiet and chirps out a one-word answer.

She does not radiate self-pity, soak up the limelight or complain about her burden.

The rising South School fourth grader was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes last July, and has spent the past 11 months learning to inject herself with insulin, trying out new healthy diets, and raising awareness about her Achilles heel.

Now the face of the Fairfield County chapter of the American Diabetes Association, the blond softball player and her family are speaking out about their experience and offering advice to those hearing the 'D'-word for the first time.

The Diagnosis

Last summer, when Ashley was eight years old,

See ASHLEY on Page 10



Ashley Dunnam, pictured at left at Walt Disney World with brother Troy, mom Ashley and father Tom, was diagnosed last summer with Type 1 diabetes. Embracing the challenge, she and her family are trying to raise awareness and funds as the local American Diabetes Association's ambassador family.

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NEW CANAAN ADVERTISER, NEW CANAAN, CONN., THURSDAY, JUNE 25, 2009

Ashley:

Continued from Page 1

shirt, she told the *Advertiser* Monday how she felt staying in the hospital for five days.

"I didn't really know what it was," she said. "I wanted to go home because it was so noisy there."

Showing less concern for the diabetes than whether she was going to make it to a friend's birthday party that weekend (which was at Yankee Stadium, and which she did), Ashley wasted no time learning how to live with the disease.

"The doctors were trying to teach us as parents how to draw the insulin, give it to her and check her blood glucose level with the monitor, and she just wanted to do it," said Andrea. "She kept saying 'When do I get my turn? When can I do it?'"

Sure enough, less than a week after the Dunnam family returned home to New Canaan, the aspiring cheerleader took control of her own insulin shots.

Now, according to her parents, Ashley checks her numbers every couple of hours and injects herself with insulin every day with breakfast and dinner.

"She is just amazing, she always comes in with a smile," said departing South School nurse Roxy Rosati, who until this week worked with children with special health needs. "She is under such great control because she really looks at diet, exercise and eating right, but she never seems down about what she can or can't have."

Rosati said she would test Ashley's blood glucose level anywhere from two to seven times a day, including before snack-time, before lunch, before dismissal, sometimes before recess and sometimes after recess.

"She's really poked anywhere from 11 to 13 times

a day with needles," said Andrea. "And never has she once complained."

Asked how she has remained so strong, Ashley replied in a soft voice, "Because I've seen some friends of mine that haven't been doing as well as me," referring to four friends who also have diabetes.

Every Morsel

In the 11 months since Ashley's diagnosis, the Dunnam family has had to make several adjustments.

"Obviously there's a lot of preparation with anything you do. If you just run to the store, you have to be sure that you have her stuff," said Tom, referring to Ashley's glucagon and meter. "If we're going from practice out to dinner we have to bring her kit, her insulin."

It is something the whole family has become vigilant about, including Ashley's 10-year-old brother, Troy.

"He's like the traffic cop in the house," joked Tom, "making sure everything's getting done right, and (asking) 'whose job is this?' He's very organized and detailed, so he's always on top of everything."

"The only time she forgets is right after school," the soon-to-be Saxe fifth grader said Monday from under a New Canaan Rams' cap, when most children just want to have a snack and play.

The biggest change, however, can be found in the pantry and the refrigerator.

Unable to have foods that will spike her sugar level, Ashley has long since dismissed the days of white breads, white rice, crackers, white pasta and cake, and instead embraces plates full of fruits, vegetables, nuts and beans.

Broccoli, the aspiring cheerleader said, is her favorite.

"Literally every morsel of food she puts in her mouth we

have to know about because we need to know how many carbs she's consuming because we need to give her insulin to compensate," said Andrea.

"There's no such thing as 'picking' with Ashley in terms of food," said Tom. "And again, just knowing that if she goes two hours without checking her numbers or having food or whatever it is, that the clock is now clicking down to the point where if we don't do that — we don't give her food or check her numbers — it could get serious."

Since her diagnosis, Ashley has had only one "scare," which was set in motion by a bout of strep throat in December but soon subsided.

Describing what his daughter deals with as "an unbelievable burden," Tom said Ashley has made some major changes to her diet — and to a great extent, her family has been right by her side.

"We've gotten so health conscious," said Andrea. "Tom's lost 35 pounds since her diagnosis."

Life-saving Stuff

Soon after the Dunnam family returned home from Yale and Ashley went off to her first birthday party as a diabetic, New Canaan resident and friend Kevin Levile popped by with some books about diabetes and diet.

Levile, whose daughter Claire is one of Ashley's closest friends, recently co-founded the Web-based weight management community Eat Right America, to combat obesity and unhealthy eating — what he told the *Advertiser* last year was a growing epidemic.

The more pages Tom digested, the increasingly disappointed — "now unbelievably disappointed" — he said he became with how the nutritionists at Yale-New Haven — the "best children's diabetes hospital in the world" —

advised his family to handle the disease.

They basically asked what she eats, he recalled, made some calculations "and said well, based on what Ashley eats, she needs this much insulin."

Tom, who spent 15 years in the golf industry, is now vice president of sales at Eat Right America and is nurturing a new passion revolving around healthy eating.

"It's life-saving stuff," he said. "The difference between how I was eating and how I am eating is pretty big. But the difference in my health is unbelievable."

Praising the American Diabetes Association on its efforts to educate, manage and research the disease, Tom said there is more of which he would like to make people aware.

"Too many people think, 'I have diabetes, I eat this, I take that,'" he said. "That's not how it has to work. It's not how it should work."

Rather than seeing insulin as the ability to eat anything, the goal should be to have to take as little insulin as possible, he said, referring to tools such as the insulin pump as "a license to eat anything you want and just turn up the pump."

By eating the right foods, he said, diabetics can lower their insulin intake by leaps and bounds.

"I'd like to see people actually reverse their diabetes," he added, referring to 90 to 95 percent of diabetics who are not Type 1, "because they can."

Stepping Out

It is this new take on nutrition and its effect on diabetes that Tom is hoping to champion as part of the American Diabetes Association's Step Out: Walk to Fight Diabetes, of which the Dunnam family are the "ambassador family." (See

related story on Page 11)

It is just one of the ways Ashley's story is impacting the surrounding community.

"In the 11 months that she's had it, she has never once, not once, complained about diabetes," said Andrea, calling her daughter a "role model" and "inspiration for other diabetics."

Not long ago, Andrea was preparing dinner when Ashley approached her with the dreaded question: Why me?

Startled but also expecting this, Andrea took the religious route, explaining that God chose her because He knew she was strong enough to handle it.

"And I'm telling you, her posture, she felt empowered," Andrea said, radiating the glow of a proud mother. "And since then, she's really felt like it's a gift, (that) there's a purpose behind it."

Carrying her cross with a smile, Ashley last Thursday hosted a fund-raiser birthday party at the Darien Playhouse.

While viewing "Hotel for Dogs" and donning "Fight Diabetes" T-shirts, Ashley and her friends celebrated another year with donations rather than gifts.

By the end of the night, she had raised more than \$500 for the American Diabetes Association, plus a \$250 donation from the playhouse, in hopes of one day finding a cure.

Calling her daughter an "inspiration," Andrea reflected on what Ashley's diabetes has done to and for the family.

"When she was diagnosed, Tom said to me, 'Andrea, some good will come from this,'" she said. "And I think that good has come from it. We've all been eating more nutritiously. And now outside of the family we're trying to make a difference to the whole diabetes world."