

Dear Mrs. Cliff

Former students, parents rally behind teacher diagnosed with cancer

By Tanner Kent

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For the last two weeks of the school year, Kathi Cliff's kindergartners prayed their usual three times a day.

But in the absence of their beloved teacher — a surprise cancer diagnosis forced Cliff from the classroom in mid May — those little Mankato Loyola students would conclude their usual prayers somewhat unusually: "And please bless Mrs.

Cliff," they would say in unison.

Since 1976, Cliff has taught kindergarten at Loyola (save for one twoyear hiatus in which she taught first grade). She helped pioneer the school system's change to all- day kindergarten in 1992, making Loyola one of the region's first schools — public or private — to adopt the now popular all- day format.

In April, however, Cliff was told she had developed lung cancer. The cancer is treatable, but only through regular doses of radiation and chemotherapy at the Andreas Cancer Center, located on the campus of the Mayo Clinic Health System in Mankato.

The treatments, of course, are not pleasant and are far from finished. And those who know her weren't content to let Cliff fight that battle alone.

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File photo

During Greater Mankato Lemonade Day in June, second grader Julia Domas (right) used her proceeds to help her kindergarten teacher Kathi Cliff (left) pay for cancer treatment. Organizers have now planned an upcoming benefit for Cliff, a longtime Mankato Loyola teacher.

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In order to help raise money for her medical costs, a group of Loyola parents has planned a non-competitive 5K walk/run on July 16.

“She’s just this amazing and vibrant woman,” said Amy Palu Pacheco Bloch, an event organizer whose two children were in Cliff’s class. “All of us parents know her and we just wanted to do something to help out.”

The helping began in the spring when word spread of Cliff’s diagnosis. Since purple is her favorite color, the school coordinated a day for students to pay \$1 to discard their uniforms in favor of purple garb. The school also sold purple bracelets, 500 of which were sold in the first three hours.

After that, Palu Pacheco Bloch and a pair of fellow organizers began contacting parents and business owners in the Loyola community.

Within weeks, they settled on a walk/run event that will also feature a release of purple balloons.

All registration fees, Tshirt sales and proceeds will be deposited into a benefit account for Cliff at Northern Star Bank in Mankato.

“This outpouring of love and support has just been overwhelming,” Cliff said. “I didn’t choose this road. But I’m on it and I’m staying as positive as I can.”

That positivity is one of Cliff’s trademarks.

The event was named the “I Think I Can 5K” after Cliff’s favorite story — “The Little Engine That Could,” which is a children’s tale about a small train engine whose positivity overcomes an impossible task.

Cliff read the story every year on the first day of school to show her students they could accomplish anything.

“There aren’t many people you come across that go straight to your heart,” said Shannon Schwab, who volunteered alongside Cliff for a time and had two children attend her classroom. “She’s an angel in disguise.”

Betty Widmer Blace was the substitute teacher who filled in for Cliff after her diagnosis. Widmer Blace, herself, has had two children in Cliff’s classroom and said there are few teachers who can match her enthusiasm and commitment.

“Her energy is just amazing,” Widmer Blace said.

“Everybody has bad days, but you could never see that on her face.”

As for Cliff, she admitted some days are better than others. She buoys her spirit with inspirational quotes — her love of quotations is another trademark — and said she is trying to stay busy despite the exhaustion and pain from the cancer treatments.

"I don't like the word 'can't,'" Cliff said.

" Sometimes I get down, but I just pick myself back up."

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