

‘Hair is healing’

St. Baldrick’s is a tradition for 11-year-old cancer survivor

By Leah Masi

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CORTLAND, N.Y — Alayah Green will once again shave Roxanne Davis’s head on Sunday. It’s become a tradition.

Alayah, an 11-year-old cancer survivor from Auburn, will take the shaver to Davis’ head as part of the St. Baldrick’s event starting 1 p.m. at the Red Jug Pub in Cortland, raising money for pediatric cancer research and support.

Alayah was diagnosed with pre-B acute lymphoblastic leukemia in November 2016, when she was 3. She’s been cancer-free for six years and since then, she and her mother, Katie Green, have been sharing her story.

“She is a vehicle for awareness,” Green said.

Alayah first attended a St. Baldrick’s event in 2017, shortly after her diagnosis. Her father and grandfather let the girl shave their heads. The Auburn event ended after that, but Alayah moved to the Cortland St. Baldrick’s event in 2018. Green, a former SUNY Cortland student, had worked in college for Thomas Terwilliger, co-owner of the Red Jug Pub chain.

“We were overjoyed and honored to be one of the represented families at the event,” Green said.

That’s where Alayah met Roxanne Davis, who immediately embraced her.

“Alayah didn’t know me, and Tom handed her the shaver and said, ‘Go ahead,’” Davis recalled. “She was 4, and we made it fun for her. I just fell in love with her — she’s the cutest little thing.”

Over time, the relationship between Roxanne and Alayah grew closer, although the COVID-19 pandemic put their tradition on hold. They reunited last year.

“We were able to make that connection again,” Davis said. “I just think the world of her and her mom.”

Davis’s involvement with St. Baldrick’s stems from her background as an educator.

“We had a young student in our district with cancer,” Davis said. “Following his journey made it personal, and that was one of the reasons I got involved.”

Alayah continues shaving her head today to raise awareness for children with cancer. Davis marks each year with a shamrock tattoo. After Sunday, she will add her 14th.

“Alayah shaves her head, Roxanne gets another shamrock tattoo, and it is awesome,” Terwilliger said. “She has a shamrock for every single time she’s shaved her head over the years.”

Davis also has heart tattoos to remember two boys who died of cancer. She hopes to never have to add another.

“It’s a big moment for all of us, and then we go on our way for the rest of the year,” Davis said. “The anticipation makes it really exciting, too.”

“It is powerful to see her shave Roxanne’s head to raise money for this organization,” Green said. “Hair is healing.”

Alayah doesn’t just cut the hair, she’s donated her own, twice.

“When she was diagnosed, we were determined to find the positive,” Green said. “That became assisting organizations, raising money, and making sure awareness was spread.”

This year, the Cortland St. Baldrick’s event hopes to raise more than \$30,000 to support families affected by pediatric cancer.

“Grassroots efforts like St. Baldrick’s drive funding for better treatment options and outcomes for kids,” Green said.

Alayah thrives today because of the support and resources organizations like St. Baldrick’s provide, Green said. Alayah’s mission has been to ensure that those resources remain available for other children.

“Until it happens to you, it seems rare,” Green said. “You never know if or when it’s going to impact your family.”

Terwilliger is confident that St. Baldrick’s will continue in Cortland for years to come.

“The folks that donate, our volunteers, the kids who are sick, and their parents,” Terwilliger said. “All of them are incredible.”

And they’ll reunite on Sunday.

“As soon as Roxanne sees Alayah, her face lights up, and there are big hugs all around,” Green said. “We don’t know her outside of the event, so the fact that someone cares that much about my kid is incredibly impactful.”

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