

Dryden community rallies around 7-year-old

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

FREEVILLE — Michael Rehbein sticks his tongue out slightly and makes the sound, "Th ... th ... th ..."

He struggles for a few seconds to get the word out. Finally, he announces proudly, "Thelma!" His grandmother, Thelma Rehbein, and parents, Keith and Crystal Rehbein, all cheer.

For the great majority of 7-year-olds, saying one word does not merit a special celebration. However, Michael's life thus far has been anything but ordinary.

Michael underwent surgery last summer to correct a serious condition known as Rasmussen's Syndrome, which caused frequent seizures on his right side beginning in 1991.

"Sometimes he'd have 200 to 300 seizures a day," recalled Keith Rehbein.

"You never knew which day it was going to be like that," added Thelma, a parishioner at Holy Cross Church, 375 S. George Road.

"There were a couple of times I was up 24 hours with him. Other times I'd sit in a chair and cry my eyes out," said Crystal Rehbein.

To fight the disease, which would have become life-threatening within a few years, the left side of Michael's brain was removed in an operation performed on May 13, 1993, at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Md.

The successful surgery stopped the seizures. After spending a month this past summer in rehabilitation at Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse, Michael has returned to school. He's a first-grader at Dryden Central School.

The entire Tompkins County community has been touched not only by Michael's plight, but also that of his parents. When Crystal was laid off from her job at a computer company, she no longer had group family health insurance available to pay Michael's medical bills. (Keith, a self-employed contractor, also lacks health insurance.)

To help the Rehbeins buy private health coverage, a fund was established in which churches, schools and private donors contributed.

The response has been overwhelming, with more than \$19,000 collected thus far. Donations have come from as far away as Syracuse and even Florida.

In addition to the financial help, Keith Rehbein notes that Michael has received moral support from his Dryden classmates. "The kids try to help him as much as they possibly can,"



Seven-year-old Michael Rehbein enjoys a warm autumn afternoon by practicing his baseball swing — with some pitching help from his grandmother, Thelma.

said Keith.

Michael still faces a long journey in his rehabilitation process. He experiences partial paralysis, and, although his mind is fully alert, his speech is still extremely limited.

"It was literally like taking a 7-year-old (before the operation) and giving us a 6-month-old baby," Keith Rehbein commented.

However, said Crystal, "Eventually he will be able to carry on a normal conversation."

In the meantime, Michael communicates through pantomime and occasional words.

He reports enthusiastically that his favorite sports team is the Buffalo Bills, and his favorite cartoon is Batman.

His response was decidedly more negative when asked if he has a girlfriend.

"Yecchhh!" he replied with a smile.



Michael still tires from strenuous activity while he recovers from a May 13 operation in which the left side of his brain was removed. Here he's comforted by his father, Keith.

Elmira mayor to appear at school anti-drug event

ELMIRA — Mayor James Hare is scheduled to appear at an assembly on Monday, Oct. 25, at Holy Family Primary School, 421 Fulton St.

The 10:45 a.m. event will be held in conjunction with the weeklong national celebration, United Drug-Free Youth. During the assembly, Holy Family students will hear an anti-drug presentation and pledge to remain drug-free.

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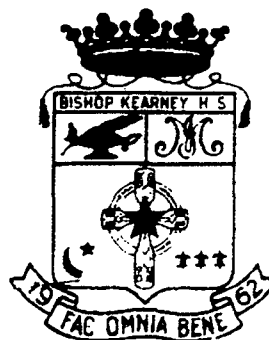
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