

Teen overcomes illness

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

FARMINGTON — On a recent Wednesday in Farmington Town Park, two small girls exchange hugs with Kelly Guidarelli — and that doesn't set too well with Kelly's 5-year-old sister, Abbie.

Abbie yanks on Kelly's T-shirt, looking for attention. After all, Abbie and most of her large family are at the park to spend lunch hour with Kelly, not share her with other kids in the recreation program that Kelly staffs.

"She's my favorite sister in the whole wide world," Abbie proclaimed.

Their brother Daniel, 6, seconded that motion. "She gives me stuffed animals," he said.

Kelly, 18, is the oldest of seven children; Abbie is the youngest. Abbie and Daniel, along with Emily and Zachary, are all adopted siblings. Add in Kelly's natural brothers, Gabriel and Ben, and you've got a pretty full household.

The adoptees all have special needs and originally came to Kelly's parents as foster children. In all, Karen and Tom Guidarelli have provided foster care for more than 50



children, many of whom have such conditions as bipolar disorder and attention-deficit disorder. Others have suffered sexual abuse.

"We are staunchly pro-life, and felt you can't say life is precious and not step in for children who needed help," explained Karen Guidarelli, whose family has attended St. Patrick's Parish in Victor since moving to Ontario County three years ago from Chicago.

Karen added that Kelly has helped ease the transition of many foster children simply by being a loving presence — especially for abused kids who were mistrustful of adults.

Yet beginning in her sophomore year, it was Kelly who needed support. That's when she began having seizures, dizzy spells, memory loss and headaches.

"I was just confused all the time, failing everything in school," she recalled.

Kelly was diagnosed with a brain tumor known as ganglioglioma. The tumor was partially removed in

June 2001, but it began growing back and she underwent another surgery in May 2002. Both operations took place at Strong Memorial Hospital in Rochester.

Kelly, realizing she would miss her junior prom because of the second surgery, made the best of the situation. Prior to her operation, she and her mother organized a benefit ball that raised \$5,000 for the Brain Tumor Society, a national organization that funds research toward finding a cure for brain tumors.

The tumor now appears to be gone, although Kelly needs to keep going for check-ups to ensure it doesn't reappear. And even though Kelly's tumor was benign, its delicate location in her head made both operations life-threatening.

"I don't know how I would have made it through the experience without God being near me," she said.

Her big clan was a big boost during this period as well. "It makes me realize I'm really lucky to have a family around me," Kelly added that in many ways, her siblings grasped



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Kelly Guidarelli plays with her sisters Abbie (center) and Emily at Farmington Town Park July 9.

the deep meaning of her situation. "I think they realized at an early age that life is really precious," she said.

Kelly managed to graduate on time from Victor High School in June, and will attend SUNY College at Fredonia this fall as a psychology major. Though she's excited about the future, Kelly still struggles with some of her recent past. Just recently, she said, she read some diary entries from while she was seriously ill.

"I was wondering what God was putting me through it for," she said, "and why he made me live through an experience that a lot of people don't."

Has she found an answer? "I think at least partially. I have a couple friends who have brain tumors and it makes them hopeful that I have survived the ordeal ... maybe I can make people look at their challenges as a way of making them strong."

The rest of the answer, she said, will probably unfold in the years to come.

"I think there is something else I haven't realized yet," she said. "But I'm keeping my eyes and ears open."

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