
Bob Welch: 'Angel Hair' helps girls cope with illness

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You're a 13-year-old girl and your world has just been rocked.

You live in a nice house in the south hills, attend Jefferson Middle School and have a great family and friends. You play soccer, ride a wakeboard, go snowboarding. Life is good.

Then everything changes. The doctor says you have cancer.

Suddenly, you're making trips to Doernbecher Children's Hospital in Portland for chemotherapy treatments. You're tired. And your hair is falling out.

Welcome to my so-called life, Staci Wright would have told you last year. But, now, the smile is back. She's got her energy back; she even plays soccer again.

And that head of hair. Wow.

That's what Wright was thinking when she first saw the results of the "Angel Hair System." Her mother, Debbie, had shown her wigs. But nothing fit. Nothing looked right. Nothing looked natural, like a hairstyle for a 13-year-old kid.

"It's a big deal, especially for young women," says Leah Barkhurst, a social worker at Doernbecher who got to know the Wrights through Staci's illness. "Their hair is a huge part of their self-esteem."

Then the Wrights heard about Janna Chrissis and her Mirage Hair Systems at Eugene's Oakway Center. Real hair. More comfortable than a wig. A semipermanent "cranial prosthesis hair system," which is real hair that offers more permanent adhesion than a wig, that not only looked great, but wasn't going to get knocked askew if Staci went snowboarding.

Expensive? About \$1,000. "But I really wanted to do this," Staci says.

"She was a very sick little girl," Chrissis recalls. "All her hair was gone. She wasn't feeling well emotionally or physically. And they come to you sort of `untrusting,' not knowing quite what to expect. They assume you're just another wig shop. But once she saw it"

She loved it. She started calling it her "angel hair." Even her doctors thought it was the real stuff. But, then, instead of basking in her own good fortune, Staci did something interesting. She turned to her mom and said:

What about the other Doernbecher kids? How can we help them?

Enter the Angel Hair Foundation, which provides funding for the same system for Oregonians, age 17 or younger, who have experienced hair loss.

The Wright family seeded the foundation - already, four young people have taken advantage of it - and are now, with the help of Doernbecher, hoping it will become

self-sustaining through donations. (The organization doesn't need donations of hair, which nonprofit organizations such as Locks of Love seek.)

"It's a fabulous idea," says Barkhurst, the Doernbecher social worker. "And remarkable how fast they got it in place. They saw a need and responded."

A year from the time Staci started treatment, the foundation had registered as a nonprofit organization and Debbie was lining up speaking opportunities.

Meanwhile, a 14-year-old girl in Corvallis, Sarah Hazleton, was going through what Staci had the year before. Chemotherapy. Loss of hair. "You feel like a fish in a fish bowl," her mother, Jeanne, says.

That's when the Angel Hair Foundation stepped in. The Corvallis mother and daughter came to Eugene to meet with the Wrights and Chrissis. "They were great to work with, so compassionate and sensitive to Sarah," Jeanne says.

Measurements of her scalp were taken. Samples of her hair, cut before she lost it, were compared to hair-color choices. Later, when Sarah returned to Eugene, she opened the box.

"There's all this pretty curly, brown hair," Sarah says. "I looked at myself in the mirror and thought: it's almost like I was before."

Staci, now 14 and a freshman at South Eugene, knows just what her friend means. But that's what the Angel Hair Foundation is all about: giving some "normal" back to young people who can hardly remember what that might be like.

Visit www.angelhairfoundation.org (<http://www.angelhairfoundation.org>) for more information.