

The Beacon

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Wayne students befriend sixth-grader recovering from cancer

By **CECILE SAN AGUSTIN** Reporter

Wayne - For 12-year-old Rowan Zubi, every time she walks into her pink bedroom she wants to "pinch herself" because it is like a "dream."

The sixth-grader was recently treated to a room "makeover" through Healing Spaces Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to warming the hearts and bringing joy to seriously ill children by creating "dream rooms" of a unique healing environment in their home that minimizes the stress of hospitalization and gives them their own space to recover.

As part of her recovery from leukemia, Rowan also received support from students at Our Lady of the Valley (OLV) School here. Students in grades five and seven wrote her letters of support as part of a project during Catholic Schools Week and on April 25, Rowan, who lives in Fairview, finally met the students to thank them.

To her peers, Rowan confidently spoke in front of them and described the room Healing Spaces created for her. She also said, "Thank you so much for your cards. Thank you for your wishes and thoughts. You are all really my friends now."

For Rowan and her family, Healing Spaces, similar to the popular ABC show "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition," worked for two days on her new bedroom. The school donated \$150 to the project and has given her much hope in her healing process.

Her mother, Asma, is especially thankful to Healing Spaces and OLV School for their support shown to Rowan. "Thank God for these people. They really did a wonderful thing for us. She has had a lot of hardships from kids at her school. They didn't understand why she was ill and even thought it was something they could catch so she was isolated from them. But when these kids wrote her letters and letters, it was a blessing. I thank and wish them much success," she said.

Lois Brianik, middle school teacher at OLV, coordinated the service project with the students at the school and Healing Spaces. "This is what I like about Catholic schools because it's normal to reach out and help people and you have so many opportunities and it's nice to help someone in our own area. We actually get to see whom we helped. I think for children that's important for them to see whom they are helping out and it's a girl just like them," she said

To the students, Rowan described her favorite activities like drawing, swimming and playing with her siblings. She also enjoys TV shows such as "Hannah Montana" and "American Idol." About her room, Rowan said, "I share my room with my little sister Nadine. She's a good sister. She's always there for me and I'm always there for her."

Creating a dream room

Healing Spaces was started three years ago by Matt Dumoff of Wayne who was 13 years old at the time. He needed to do a special project for his bar mitzvah and started the organization with the support of his parents, Mark and Linda.

About the experience of Healing Spaces, Linda Dumoff said, "It is amazing the impact you can have on a family. It's amazing - straight from our hearts we can bring love and compassion and it's the best gift money can buy."

Through the support of Hackensack Medical Center in Hackensack, the hospital nominates a client in need to be provided with a room makeover.

To make Healing Spaces a success, the organization relies on the efforts of many volunteers to create a dream room. Volunteers consist of home designers and professional carpenters who use their time to help the organization. In addition, high school students often paint the rooms for the children.

Jane Cronin, a retired nurse who volunteered her time in designing Rowan's room, was happy to lend a hand for the project. The parishioner from Corpus Christi in Chatham Township said, "It's a wonderful, wonderful thing to do this. It gets everyone involved."



FRIENDS FOREVER - Rowan Zubi (sixth bottom row) with the fifth- and seventh-grade students of Our Lady of the Valley School in Wayne, where she personally thanked them for their support and talked about Healing Spaces, an organization dedicated to creating "dream rooms" for seriously ill children.



PAY IT FORWARD - Rowan Zubi pins a "pay it forward" ribbon on seventh-grader Kristen Kachidurian from Our Lady of the Valley School in Wayne.



ALL SMILES - At Our Lady of the Valley School in Wayne, Rowan Zubi with her mother Asma visit the students.

Because of volunteers like Cronin and the Dumoffs, Rowan has been inspired to give back to other children and hopes to be like the volunteers of Healing Spaces. "Kids who are going through a lot deserve it because of what they've been through and I hope one day I can be like the people at Healing Spaces because I want to help other people too," she said.

In its existence, Healing Spaces has provided seven dream rooms to children so they may have a happy environment since many of them spend a lot of time in their rooms during their healing process.

Healing Spaces is always seeking people with skills in carpentry or high school students looking for a service project to help them create their next dream room for a child in need.

Mark Dumoff said, "We're just a bunch of ordinary people trying to do something remarkable."

During her visit at the school, Rowan gave each student who participated in the project a "pay it forward" ribbon to symbolize a "thank you" from her. She also gave the students an extra ribbon to give to someone who has really helped them become the person they are today.

For Mary Peischi, a fifth-grader at the school, helping people, especially kids who are sick, is important. Peischi said, "It felt really good to do this and it's nice to know that I can do something to make someone feel happier."

Paolo Punay, also a fifth-grader at OLV, said, "It was really touching to do this because we got to express our feelings to her and tell her what we think."

Both students, like the rest of the fifth- and seventh-graders at the school, were especially excited to meet the person they helped, giving them a greater connection to the project. "These friends actually care. They took things out of their heart. When kids are around each other, we're supposed to be talking to each other not gossiping about each other. These kids changed my life and they are real friends," said Rowan.

Myriam Mackey, a volunteer of Healing Spaces who is a parishioner at Our Lady of Consolation here, coordinated the meeting with the students at OLV and Rowan. "I was neighbors with the Dumoff family and this project just really touched my heart. Our goal is to have more students write letters and 'adopt' a client."

One interesting aspect this project has created was the togetherness of so many people of different faiths. The founders of Healing Spaces are Jewish. Rowan and her family are Muslim and the support of the students from Our Lady of the Valley comes from a Catholic school. Mark Dumoff said, "It brings together races, religions and cultures and we are all related. It's all one world and if we can bring joy and enhance the spirit of a child that has cancer or a real serious illness that's a blessing."

Said Asma, "They changed her room but also something inside of her heart. It has just made her stronger and stronger, every minute she's in there. When she comes out her room, she comes out like a positive person and believes she can do anything."

Information: www.healingspaces.org