

'Queen For A Day' Lifts Spirits Of Pediatric Patients



Tribune photo by VICTOR JUNCO

Vanessa Abello, 10, of Kissimmee, looks at her reflection in a mirror recently at St. Joseph's Children's hospital's "Queen for a Day and Hero for a Day" party for pediatric patients and their families. Hospital staff, firefighters and volunteers work to make the day special. "The girls love getting pampered," says organizer Leah Campanella. And "the boys are treated as heroes."

[Forever Fit/ Patty Kim]



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Ten-year-old Vanessa Abello didn't mind being at St. Joseph's Children's Hospital recently. Not if it meant being Queen for a Day.

She lounged in an oversized stuffed chair as Breana Dutchess went to work giving her the royal treatment. Pink is Vanessa's favorite color, and various shades tinted her eyelids, cheeks and lips. An entire table full of lipstick, eye shadow, blush, nail polish, cotton balls, Q-tips and brushes were at their disposal. Dutchess lovingly painted a bright coat on Vanessa's fingernails.

Vanessa had a crowd of supporters with her, including a white stuffed dog called Snowflake, Pinkey the pink and white teddy bear and Brownie the stuffed monkey.

"All the nurses and people are nice, and I'm having fun," Vanessa said of the party.

Pediatric girls and boys were treated to a "Queen for a Day and Hero for a Day" party Aug. 8 in the lobby of the children's hospital. It's a chance for patients, families, hospital staff, firefighters and volunteers to spend a couple of hours relaxing without the poking and prodding of medical tests and treatment.

Leah Campanella, a third-grade teacher at Hunter's Green Elementary School in New Tampa, is director of the Tampa chapter of Queen for a Day. Her group has been visiting the children's hospital in Tampa twice a year since summer 2004.

"The girls love getting pampered. When they feel beautiful, they tend to forget about what they're here going through," Campanella says. "The boys are treated as heroes. They make crafts, and they get to see the firetruck."

Firefighters manned a crafts table, where boys got to customize foam lions with a helping hand. It was an opportunity for boys and men to bond.

The girls also got to customize door hangers, bookmarks and scrapbook pages to commemorate the afternoon. Shiny, colorful beads were scattered across a table for the queens to add a

little bling to their wrists and necks.

Wint Thazin, 9, was methodically personalizing bracelets for several friends. She was discharged from the hospital after having surgery and undergoing chemotherapy, but she and her family frequently visit for activities and events. On this day, she was expecting bingo. She got quite a surprise in the lobby.

"I'm actually happy this happened!" said Wint, a fourth-grader at Roosevelt Elementary School in south Tampa.

A tiara hugged her bald head as her face dazzled with hues of her favorite color, pink, right down to her glittery pink nails. She had pink sequin flip-flops to match. Volunteers wrapped a fuzzy purple cape around her, handed her a gold scepter, sat her in the royal

rocking chair and snapped a Polaroid.

Each girl was treated to the crowning ceremony, and they all got to keep their photos to remember the day. It was extra special for Wint.

"I just wanted to come back to have some fun and see some of my old friends," Wint said.

Her older sister Ei (pronounced ee), 11, didn't want to miss out on the celebration. "I'm here to support my sister. She was very excited about today!" she said as a volunteer painted her face. Her brother and parents weren't far away.

Even 2-year-old Mia Dominguez got into the fun. Her fingernails and toenails were doused in a bright fuchsia, and her cheeks were just as rosy. Tape covered an incision on her tiny chest,

but Mia was too busy investigating the makeup table to notice.

Dutchess put the finishing touches on Vanessa before filling her goodie bag with makeup, crafts and food. A shiny tiara rested in her bouncy brown curls, which were pulled into a fluffy ponytail. It's not Dutchess' first time volunteering with the kids.

"I find it very rewarding. I don't normally get time to come to the hospital, but this is a really good time," said Dutchess, a second-grade teacher at Collins Elementary School in Riverview. "It's so nice to be with the kids and see their faces light up. It's so good to put a smile on their face."



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