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Finding a cure one dollar at a time

Loveland High sophomore wants to raise money to help find a cure for a rare neurodegenerative disease

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Fifteen-year-old Allie Kittel is like any other teenager — almost.

The Loveland High School sophomore likes to paint, hang out with friends and play the harp.

But while some teens approaching their 16th birthday wish for lavish parties and new cars, all Allie wants is \$1.

Diagnosed with Friedreich's ataxia, a rare neurodegenerative disease, Allie is trying to raise money for the disease's research through a fundraiser she started with her family.

"Have a Heart — Give a Buck" asks simply for \$1 donations, which will be given to the Friedreich's Ataxia Research Alliance in hopes of finding a cure.

"A dollar is nothing anymore. You can hardly buy a hamburger for a dollar," said Allie's mother, Sue Kittel.

"But put it all together and you build a community of support."

An Early Diagnosis

While Allie rallies to raise awareness and money for the disease, it's a reality she's known her whole life.

The Kittels learned Allie had Friedreich's ataxia when she was only 5 years old.

Although she wasn't showing the initial symptoms, which include an unsteadiness and imbalance, they knew there was a chance she had the genetically inherited disease. Her older brother, Aaron Kittel, was diagnosed earlier.

"They (my parents) first told me when I was 8," Allie remembered. "It was just like 'whatever.' I didn't really understand."

In fact, Allie wasn't too affected by the disease until recently.



Allie Kittel poses on her scooter in the halls of Loveland High School. Reporter-Herald/Sarah Bultema

Friedreich's ataxia is a progressive disease that slowly kills cells in the nervous system and makes it hard for the person to walk, Sue explained

"It's very exhausting to keep yourself upright and straight; you use more energy than other people," she said. And it often makes the person seem like they're drunk, weaving when they walk and slurring their speech, she added.

Most symptoms appear between 5 and 15 years old, and many young people with the disease require mobility aids, such as a walker or wheelchair, by their teens or early 20s, according to Friedreich's Ataxia Research Alliance's Web site, www.curefa.org.

Going Through It Together

Allie wasn't directly affected by the disease until last year, when tasks as simple as walking and talking at the same time became difficult.

"At school, when I'd do that, I'd get really out of breath and I'd have to concentrate a lot on walking," Allie explained.

Two months ago, she decided it was time to get an electric scooter to help conserve her energy — a piece of advice learned from her brother.

Aaron, who's now 30, had resisted getting a wheelchair when he was Allie's age, she said. But now, he admits he could have saved a lot of energy by using one earlier.

"I guess he's made some mistakes, and I've learned from what he had to learn the hard way," she said.

Although watching her brother's deterioration from the disease is hard — even bringing her to tears while discussing it — Allie's found it still helps in handling her own progression.

"I think a big part of it is attitude and mind-set and how they choose to see themselves," said Joe Kittel, their father.

"It's a differentiation between 'This is my body, this is not me.' That's the only way you could deal with it, I think."

High School with FA

Even with a supportive family at home, going to high school can be hard for any teenager, let alone one with a crippling disease.

"It was hard when I first started using it," said Allie, explaining that other students were confused when she started using the scooter. Many hadn't notice she had walked a little differently than the rest before.

Allie tells them she was tired, she said, not always wanting to explain much more.

In fact, her disease is not something Allie frequently discusses even with close friends.

"It doesn't come up that often," she said. "Maybe they don't feel comfortable talking about it."

Sharing the word, Finding a Cure

It's this lack of knowledge in the community that's driving the family's fundraiser.

“It’s hard to tell them and it’s hard for them to hear,” Sue said, pointing out Allie’s situation with her peers.

But the drive is a way to open discussions and show support.

“In a very powerless situation, a disease that has no cure, it gives us some power to do something, which is to put the money into research,” Sue said.

Through the “Have a Heart — Give a Buck” drive, Allie aims to raise \$10,000, one dollar at a time.

And as the days count closer to Jan. 28, her birthday, she’s knows each donation brings researchers one step closer to finding a cure.

“Give me hope” is her only Sweet 16 wish.

To make a donation of any amount, visit www.firstgiving.com/1buck4fa.

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