

Surgery inspires hope, frustration

By Emily Cannon
UW News Lab

Four-year-old Brandon Brauns returned home July 4 after spending two months in Memphis, Tenn. with his parents, Jeff and Kris Brauns of Bothell.

Brandon took several rolls of photos, rode a tricycle and had a life-threatening tumor removed from his brain.

Kris and Jeff Brauns took their son to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, where doctors have great success with the rare type of tumor Brandon has. After treatment there, his prognosis is good. Neurosurgeons removed nearly all of the tumor and Brandon's condition is rapidly improving.

"I think by September, he'll be eating (solid food) again," Kris said, noting that Brandon is being nourished with liquids.

The Brauns were not so hopeful after Brandon's first surgery at Children's Hospital in Seattle on Feb. 10. Doctors could only remove about half the tumor. Afterward, they started a chemotherapy program designed

Raffle

Bothell Florist is offering a raffle to benefit Brandon Brauns of Bothell. The prize is one \$35 arrangement a month for one year. Winner will be announced Sept. 1.

Tickets are \$2 each and available at Bothell Florist, 10021 N.E. 183rd Street, across from City Hall.

to prepare him for a second surgery. But Kris Brauns said doctors at Children's told her they would not perform a second surgery.

And Group Health would not pay for Brandon's surgery anywhere else, the Brauns said.

Kris and Jeff first knew something was wrong when Brandon started having headaches in December. In January, he vomited every morning. On Feb. 4, he vomited all day and went to the hospital for tests. On Feb. 6, neurosurgeon Dr. Anthony Avellino told the family Brandon had a tumor in a "high-rent part of the

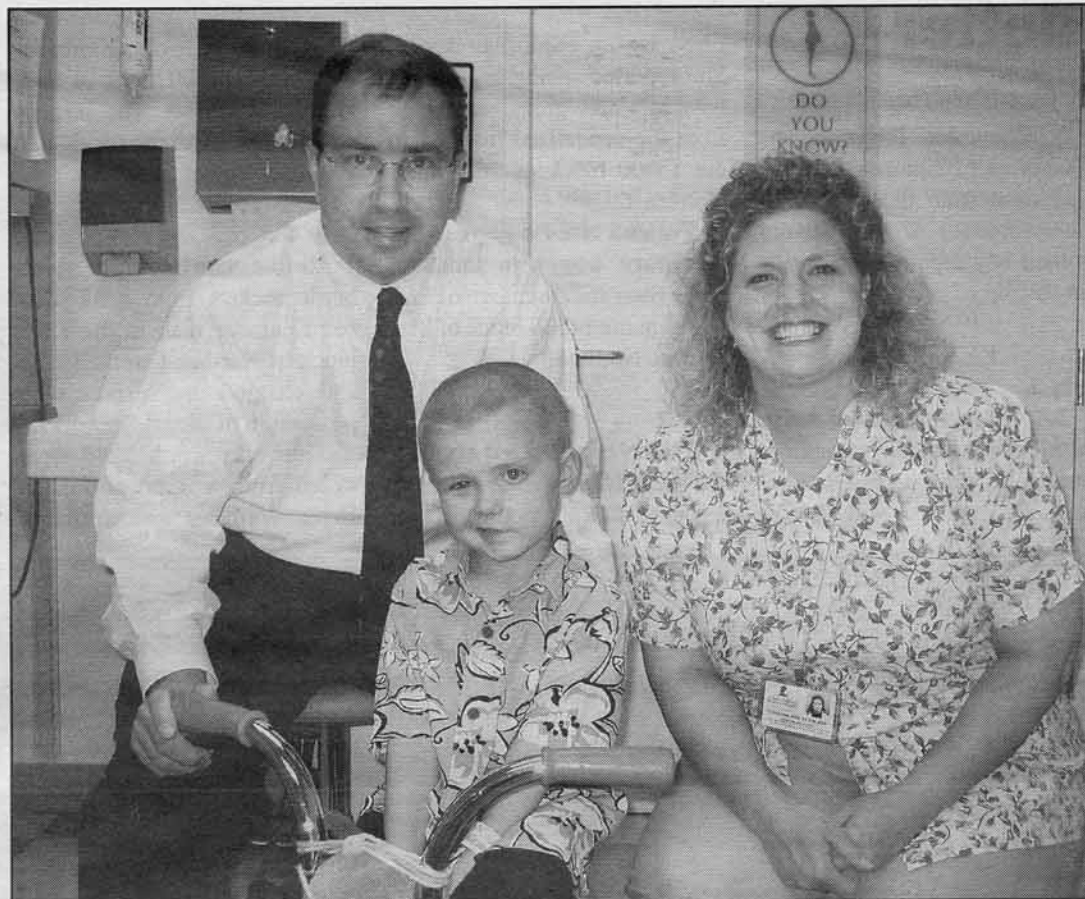


Photo courtesy of Kris Brauns

Four-year-old Brandon Brauns takes a minute with Dr. Thomas Merchant, the head radiologist and oncologist at St. Jude Hospital in Memphis, and a nurse at the hospital.

brain."

Dr. Thomas Merchant, a radiation oncologist at St. Jude, developed the chemotherapy program to prepare for the surgery in Memphis. Avellino and oncologist Dr. Russell Geyer supported

the Brauns' decision to go to St. Jude, a unique hospital not only because of its high success rates, but because the atmosphere more closely resembles a playroom than a hospital. "You've got all these kids running around with

tubes and masks and no hair and eye patches," Kris said. "But unless they're on some major chemo and feel terrible, for the most part, they're pretty happy."

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Brandon

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Merchant and doctors Rick Boop and Robert Sanford, neurosurgeons at LeBonheur, a nearby children's medical center, were confident they could treat the tumor. Brandon was in experienced hands.

"This was one of the best nights of our lives in the past six months," Kris recalled. "They called and said this was a pretty straightforward case."

By the time they operated on

Brandon on May 2, Kris said Group Health had denied the Braunes coverage twice. The first time, they said it was because St. Jude was out of their network. To appeal, the family sent results of a study conducted by Merchant. The second denial reasoned that Brandon was part of the study and therefore not covered.

The surgery lasted six hours. Boop and Sanford removed all but a tiny piece of tumor hiding on a major blood vessel, too dangerous to remove. After radiation,

there is said to be only a 10 percent chance it will grow again.

"Sanford, who's probably 50-something, walks in, and, kind of like Clint Eastwood, he goes: 'Oh, tumor's out,'" Jeff recalled.

The Brauns are appealing Group Health's denial a third time, this time to an independent review organization. Since passage of the Patient Bill of Rights in 2000, third-party appraisal is guaranteed to those with health coverage in Washington.

"Our main argument is: You denied out of network, fine. You

denied it because it's investigational, that's wrong," Kris said.

They aren't asking Group Health to cover treatment that could have been done at home. In Seattle the family would have needed to go between facilities downtown and at the University of Washington.

At St. Jude, "This was done at the same building, every day," Jeff said.

Thanks to an outpouring of support from friends and family, the Brauns were able to take off time from work and stay with

Brandon in Memphis for two months. Several fund-raisers helped with living expenses. When a family friend died, her husband asked that donations be sent to Brandon's family.

Kris, a self-described "workaholic," said Brandon's illness put everything into perspective.

"I'm convinced God was preparing us for this," she said. "People get so busy, they go through life not slowing down to notice ... When something happens like this, people do slow down."

Brandon, however, is quickly returning to life as a normal 4-year-old. He was already riding his tricycle and took a spill in the driveway.

Looking through the photo album of his trip, Brandon explained several details in his quiet but determined voice. One photo showed his central line port, which was there "so I don't have to get stuck in my arm." "There's my stinky foot," he said of another picture. He brought the photo close to his mother's face and challenged, "Mom! Smell my foot."

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