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'Three great weeks' to say goodbye

With her parents' help, a dying girl spent her last days living life to the fullest.

Thursday, February 22, 2007

By Pam Lundborg
Staff writer

Every morning for the past three weeks, Gayle and Jim Froio awoke with the realization that it could be the last day of their 6-year-old daughter's life.

On Monday, Shannon Froio could no longer battle the leukemia that had been lurking in her system for four years. She died in her mother's arms.

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"It's been so hard, even when you know it's coming," said her father, Jim, who is the executive principal at Cicero-North Syracuse High School.

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On the last day of Shannon's life, Jim bathed her and laid out a pretty outfit. As usual, the 6-year-old vetoed her father's fashion sense and chose a far more chic Tigger T shirt. Jim then carried his daughter downstairs to watch her favorite movie, "101 Dalmatians."

"I could see she was starting to breathe heavily, so I asked Gayle to come into the room," Jim said. "I put her in Gayle's arms. She breathed a couple of breaths and that was it."

Shannon's leukemia was diagnosed in 2002. She had two bone marrow transplants with marrow donated by Raven Russell, of Dalton City, Ill. The Post-Standard was there when Russell, who didn't know Shannon, met the Froios for the first time last summer.

Three weeks ago, Shannon came down with what looked like the flu. The Froios learned that Shannon's cancer had returned for a third time, and there was nothing the doctors could do.

The doctors estimated Shannon only had a few weeks to

live. They told the Froios to take her home and enjoy her as much as possible.

"We did have three great weeks," Jim said. "She got a little weaker each day. She played with her friend Emily and made forts out of blankets."

At Shannon's request, every day was pretty much the same. She would wake up, eat breakfast and declare that she wanted to ride the merry-go-round at Carousel Center. Then she went to Build-A-Bear and made a stuffed animal, followed by lunch at Subway.

The employees at Build-A-Bear quickly got to know Shannon. The company president called the Froios and sent Shannon a personalized bear. The store was stocked with discontinued lions - Shannon's favorite animal - for her to stuff.

When she got home, Shannon would ask her father to line up her 25-plus Build-A-Bears and introduce the day's newest arrival to the group. Shannon will be surrounded by her bears at her calling hours Friday and at her memorial service Sunday, Jim said.

"We made the best of a horrible situation," he said. "We couldn't have asked for a better little girl these past six years."

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