

# Sacred Heart community plays major role in Winnetka family's homecoming



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While most people were hopping on a plane to escape the cold temps and gray skies at the start of spring break March 21, Winnetka's Jennifer Felderman and her family were eager for their plane to touchdown at O'Hare, bringing them home after a one-year stay in San Francisco.

The extended stay supported their 4-year-old daughter, Reese, against her battle with Juvenile Myelomonocytic Leukemia.

While the joy of knowing their daughter was on the road to recovery, the Felderman family received another joyous, unexpected surprise from the Sacred Heart Parish and School community after the family boarded a trolley to ride from the airport to their Winnetka home. Reese and her twin sister, Quinn, attended Sacred Heart, prior to the diagnosis.

"We rode a trolley as a symbol of leaving San Francisco and as we turned up Gage Street, we could hear cheers before we could see the crowd. It was this incredible roar and crowd of people, occupying all of Gage Street up to the front doors of the school," Jennifer said. "Friends, neighbors, teachers and classmates stood outside, cheering for us, holding heartfelt posters, giving us the most loving return home we could have ever imagined. The most exciting moment came when we stepped off of the trolley and

Reese ran up to see her classmates, giving everyone high fives. It was such a special moment.”

Along with the cheers, high fives and hugs was another surprise: pink flamingo decor. Flamingos were a symbolic animal that helped Reese stay strong through some of her darkest days.

“There were times after the bone-marrow transplant that Reese was very sick. She couldn’t really hold her own head up, she had to fight to walk. There were even times that she could only absorb five minutes of life at one time. If five minutes was all that she had, then I wanted them to be joyful ones. One of the things she dreamt about was going to the zoo to see flamingos, becoming a symbol of joy for Reese,” Jennifer said.

When the Sacred Heart community caught wind of just how dire Reese’s struggles were in San Francisco truly were, they took their level of compassion to a new level, ensuring Reese knew just how much she was loved, just as they had done at the March 21 homecoming.

“When we were facing our toughest times, we received all the love we needed from our community back home. Nearly every day, a new, amazing and thoughtful present arrived, playing an important role in Reese’s recovery,” Jennifer said. “As she grew to withstand more than just five minutes of life, we used the gifts to motivate her to get out of bed, rebuilding her strength. We set up a pop-up shop in the halls, so she would have to walk to her present, pretending to go shopping. Knowing a new gift awaited her every day encouraged Reese to keep giving it her all. These presents were a major part of her recovery,” Jennifer said.

Friend and neighbor Kerry Farley said supporting the Feldermans was an all-school endeavor, reflecting the values the school and parish holds dear.

“Once you are a part of the Sacred Heart community, you are always a part of the Sacred Heart community,” Farley said. “Each week at the children’s mass for the past year, there has been a petition said for Reese and her family. This will continue until Reese is raised to full health. The commitment of the teachers, staff, students and parents will continue because we are a community that cares. We truly care about each other and we feel that we are honoring God by reaching out to those who need help, support and love.”

As for the Feldermans — Chris, Jennifer, twins Reese and Quinn, and sister Claire — they are taking it one day at a time as Reese continues to work with her new medical team at Lurie Children’s Hospital. Along with seeing Reese back to full-health, Jennifer has one more objective to meet.

“I just want to cry over spilled milk,” Jennifer said. “By that I mean, I used to think having three kids under the age of 3 came with its challenges, resulting in some spilled milk on the floor on most days. Now, I just want to get back to that day-to-day chaos. I tell everyone that spilled milk is just a sign your kids are alive, healthy and doing well.

Embrace it — it may sound cliché, but what I've learned from this journey is that nothing, truly nothing matters if you have your friends, family and good health.”