

Laura Knuckles Retro Riley Story

Celebrating the wondrous memory of 4-year-old Laura Kay Knuckles may just be what the doctor ordered to launch us all into the new year with a positive can-do attitude and a joyful spirit no matter what these most challenging times may bring. October of last year marked 50 years since Laura Knuckles passed away at Riley Hospital for Children where she spent much of her brief four years of life. Back then, hundreds of medical professionals went far above and beyond with their time, expertise, hopes, and caring to give Laura her chance to have a life.

Laura Kay was first admitted to Riley Hospital for Children on January 3, 1968, by Dr. Edwin Gresham, then a resident and later Director of Riley Hospital's Newborn Special Care Center. Dr. Randall Caldwell, resident, and later Director of Pediatric Cardiology at Riley Hospital, cared for Laura Kay on her last day at the hospital, October 17, 1972, when Laura Kay passed away. Over 50 years later, Dr. Caldwell recalled, "I shall never forget the day we lost Laura Kay."

To breathe, to just be able to breathe, Laura Kay had to be always hooked up to a ventilator that controlled her breathing after four operations with bone grafts to her sternum and ribs to increase the size of her rib cage and give her lungs more room. The helmet that Laura Kay had to wear 24 hours a day held all the ventilator tubes in place. Karen Church, R.N., long-time Riley Hospital nurse, recalls that Dr. Alvin LoSasso, anesthesiologist, one of the principal physicians in charge of Laura Kay's care, came up with the idea of a helmet with a metal arm and clamp to support her endotracheal tube. A technician who usually made casts for arms and legs helped to fit the foam-lined helmet to Laura's head.

Laura Kay had asphyxiating thoracic dystrophy, a rare birth defect. This genetic disease meant that Laura's rib cage would not expand to accommodate her growing lungs, which at the time did not offer much hope for life for Laura. But Laura Kay had something else to say about that and so did her Riley Hospital medical team. She could have been the little girl destined to live out her life in her hospital bed while hooked up to a ventilator. But that was not to be for Laura Kay. The pictures from that time tell the story of an incredibly determined little girl with a lot of giddy-up-and-go who had her own agenda with places to go, people to see, and things to do. Click [here](#) to watch a video that shows Laura Kay in action.

Laura Kay got up from her hospital bed and off she flew. Laura Kay could be seen in the hallways of Riley riding her tricycle with her ventilator on a wagon trailing behind her. She walked around her hospital ward and in the hospital's hallways with other little kids, with her ventilator trailing behind her. One Christmas, Laura was seen atop a holiday present – a battery-powered toy car – wheeling through the hallways of Riley with a nurse pushing the portable ventilator bringing up the rear. Laura Kay's parents bought her a trike when she was 3 years old and whenever nurses had time, they would push the ventilator behind her in the hallway so Laura Kay could ride her trike, which often attracted a lot of attention and cheers from passersby. The Riley Hospital of 50 years ago was a different place, smaller, and more compact and many staff knew and talked with each other. Hospital administrators, nurses, maintenance workers, and janitorial workers all stopped by to see Laura and bring her presents of toys, clothes, and balloons.

Laura Kay's story attracted media coverage that captured the hearts of many who wanted to see Laura get her chance. Then Indiana Governor, Edgar Whitcomb, was among the many who came to visit Laura. Indiana Blue Cross Blue Shield, the Marion County Welfare Department, and the Division of

Services to Crippled Children of the State Welfare Department stepped in to assume almost all of Laura Kay's medical costs which totaled at the time to \$183,000, one of the largest in United States history at the time.

The day did come for Laura Kay when she finally, finally was able to take off her helmet and not be dependent on a ventilator to breathe. She was all little girl underneath that helmet with a head of blonde curly hair, brown eyes, and a smile as big as the sky. Laura was not to be denied. She did all she could with her chance to be a kid and do all the things that kids do. Her Riley Hospital medical team was with Laura and her family every step of the way. "I still see the joy on her face, especially when her helmet came off, and still hear her laugh," says Karen Church, R.N, long-serving nurse at Riley Hospital for Children. "Anyone who was at Riley during "the Laura years" would have fond memories."

Laura Kay left Riley on June 7, 1971, to go home with her family. No helmet, no ventilator, no tubes. Just a little girl going home to live a normal life with her family. But time for Laura Kay eventually ran out. Laura Kay returned to Riley Hospital on October 16, 1972, with pneumonia in one lung and passed away a day later. Marlene Foley, R.N. a long-time Riley Hospital veteran nurse, described Laura's passing "as if we had lost one of our own." Tonya Goodrich Pinner, daughter of Tony Goodrich, A.R.I.T., respiratory therapist who later became the first Chief of Respiratory Therapy, remembers how much her father loved Laura Kay, how much the Knuckles family loved Tony, and how devastated Tony was at her passing." Laura Kay's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Franklin B. Knuckles, said, "we loved Laura's nurses. We couldn't believe the number of Riley nurses who were at Laura Kay's funeral. It seemed like the whole world was there." "You just can't imagine the number of friends she had." News wire services picked up the story of Laura Kay's passing and her family received many letters of condolence from people around the world.

The story of 4-year-old Laura Kay Knuckles is a reminder in this year before Riley Hospital observes its centennial that the extraordinary medical care provided to children here has never changed over time and neither have the medical professionals at Riley Hospital who bring their passion, hearts, and hopes with them to give every child under their care their best chance for life. Whatever tough times this new year brings to all of us, tuck away the memory of 4-year-old Laura Kay Knuckles close to your heart and remember her joy and appreciation to just be alive and able to do the things that kids do, a chance that she got when she was here for a short while over 50 years ago at Riley Hospital for Children.

References:

Little Laura's All Heart in Her Battle for Life, *Indianapolis Star*, May 18, 1972, pp. 1 and 6.

Laura, 3, Wins Fight to Breathe and Live, *Indianapolis Star*, June 4, 1971, pp. 1 and 21.

Helmet Removed, *Indianapolis Star*, December 25, 1971, p. 12.

No Place like Home, *Indianapolis Star*, June 8, 1971, p. 1.

Reverse Ends 4-Year Struggle for life for Valiant Little Girl, *Indianapolis Star*, October 18, 1972, p. 1.

Karen Church, R.N. Recollections

Marlene Foley, R.N. Recollections

Randall Caldwell, M.D., Recollections

Photos (courtesy IUPUI University Library Special Collections and Archives)

Title: Governor Ed Whitcomb visits Laura Knuckles and other children in Riley Hospital

Item ID: UA024_PB03_0616

Link: <https://indianamemory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/IUPUIphotos/id/32440/rec/1>

Title: Riley Hospital Patient and Monkey, 1970

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Link: <https://indianamemory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/IUPUIphotos/id/4652/rec/2>

Title: Santa Giving Gifts to Riley Hospital Patients, 1969

Item ID: UA24-001704n

Link: <https://indianamemory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/IUPUIphotos/id/4651/rec/3>