**Hunter Gifford – 2017 Cabin Fever Fighter**

Hunter Gifford is a happy, spunky seven-year-old who enjoys climbing trees while jamming to his favorite music. *Fight Song* isn’t just a favorite song of Hunter’s…it’s a way of life. Born an entertainer, he brightens the days of his second grade class at Lincoln K-8 Choice Elementary School in Rochester.  Hunter has two older brothers, Ian, who is 10 years old and Alec who is 9.  They, too, know how to entertain.  Ian loves performing magic tricks and is an avid reader while Alec enjoys singing and cheering on the Minnesota Twins. Hunters parents, Lisa and Steve, both work at Mayo Clinic, and more importantly, serve as an attentive audience to their children’s endless display of talent.

On October 26th*,* 2016, Hunter was experiencing pain when he urinated.  Initially, it was dismissed as a simple, treatable urinary tract infection, but the symptoms persisted.   By that evening, Hunter was not being his normal, active, fun-loving self; Lisa knew there was something wrong.  They went to the Emergency Room where tests revealed a bone mass pushing on his bladder. Upon further examination, the family was told that Hunter hasEwing’s sarcoma, a type ofbone cancer.On November 1st, they learned that not only was the cancer in his hip bone, but it was an extremely aggressive metastatic cancer that had spread to his abdomen and lungs*.* This was unfathomable considering their sweet, charming little boy was climbing trees just days earlier.

One week after his diagnosis, Hunter began chemotherapy. He was scheduled to undergo 28 rounds of chemotherapy that, unfortunately, would make him bitterly nauseous.  Hunter would become so nauseous that the chemo treatment schedule had to be postponed several times to allow for him to recover enough to continue.  Despite its debilitating effects, after about one month into Hunter’s courageous fight, the chemotherapy seemed to be working! The results of his tests at that time showed a significantly smaller tumor in his left hip. In addition to his chemotherapy, Hunter started the first of 31 proton beam radiation sessions on February 13th, 2017. When Hunter’s chemotherapy and the proton beam sessions are completed, he will undergo radiation treatments on his lungs. Hunter still has a very long road ahead of him in his cancer treatment. We know this strong little man will emerge victorious.  We know and believe this because he is “Hunter Strong,” and we are all behind him throughout this journey!

Thankfully, battling cancer does not stop Hunter from enjoying his life and his family. He enjoys playing on his iPad, making forts, swimming, and following his big brothers’ examples. Another passion for Hunter, not unlike most other seven-year-olds: LEGOs! Hunter likes to disassemble things and build them back again.  No matter how taxing chemotherapy is on him, he always has time for LEGOs. It’s not unusual for him to have a LEGO bucket on one side and an emesis basin (AKA: barf bucket) on his other. Hunter is also quite the jokester. His parents, teachers and care team at the hospital are subject to his clever practical jokes! Hunter’s favorite animals are monkeys, which is very fitting due to his own affinity for climbing trees. If you would ask Hunter what he plans to do when he grows up, he would tell you that he would like to be an Arborist and plant a forest of trees. No one would be allowed to cut them down because he wants to help the environment. It is this tremendous spirit that helps carry Hunter throughout his courageous battle.

The Gifford family has endured far more hardships than most of us could ever imagine.  Three years prior to Hunter’s diagnosis, Steve’s mother lost her battle with cancer.  Lisa is challenged every day due to her battle with Lupus, and Alec has autism, as well as cerebral palsy.  Despite all of these tragic hardships, their positive attitudes, warm smiles, strong faith in God and the loving bond that the Gifford family shares exemplify their amazing spirit and their relentless belief in a better tomorrow.  Family, friends, co-workers, the Lincoln School community, Gloria Dei Lutheran Church community and the staff at the Mayo Clinic have all been an amazing source of support to the Gifford family. The prayers, meals, cards, letters and love that has been given to them, has made an immeasurably positive and important impact on this challenging time that the Gifford’s have had to endure.

Hunter holds a number of these people in high regard.  He identified several people that he views as heroes in his life including his care team at Mayo Clinic, police officers, teachers and staff from his school.  With so many positive influences in his life, one Hero stands above all others and holds a special place in his heart:  Mr. (Will) Ruffin, a teacher at Hunter’s school.  We are honored to have Mr. Ruffin team with Hunter during the 2017 Cabin Fever Fighter Round.