

Mother, daughter prove popular in online contest

BY MARIE WILSON | CONTRIBUTOR

Prize of \$50,000 will go to charity fighting disease

Peggy Shapiro-Nyeholt said that as a child, her daughter Ilyce Randell loved the book *The Little Engine That Could*.

Randell, now a Buffalo Grove resident, has the "I think I can" power of one 500-word essay and thousands of online votes to thank for her success at winning the Diet Rite Zero Boundaries Woman Contest.



Zero Boundaries Woman Contest winner Ilyce Randell and her mother, Peggy Shapiro-Nyeholt, play with Max Randell 8. — Michelle Lohmann / Staff Photographer

Earlier this year, Des Plaines resident Shapiro-Nyeholt sat down to enter her daughter in the contest by writing what she called "a love letter to my daughter."

"I locked myself in a room for six hours and got what I wanted down in the right words, and then I honestly kind of forgot about it," said Shapiro-Nyeholt of her entrance essay.

Shapiro-Nyeholt said she had no trouble putting forth the effort required to enter Randell, formerly of Palatine and Rolling Meadows, in the contest because of her daughter's ability to persevere through all circumstances.

"She truly is an inspiration. Our family faced the most devastating news possible, and we rose to the challenge," Shapiro-Nyeholt said.

That devastating news came when Randell's son, Max, was diagnosed at 4 months old with Canavan disease, a genetic disorder that gradually lessens the brain's ability to respond to nerve signals.

Following that diagnosis, Randell and Shapiro-Nyeholt formed Canavan Research Illinois, a foundation that supports clinical research to combat the disease.

"We didn't even leave the hospital (after Max was diagnosed). We sat on the floor and made a plan for a charity," Shapiro-Nyeholt said.

The charity they formed supports research, which Randell said has provided helpful gene therapy treatments to about 40 children with Canavan disease.

'Every penny helps'



"Every penny helps," Randell said. "It goes towards research, medical research. Before we found out we won, we gave \$120,000 to the top researcher for possible therapy that could help beyond what's been done."

Randell and Shapiro-Nyeholt believe that since they planned to donate any possible winnings to CRI, they increased their chances of earning community support and winning the Zero Boundaries Woman Contest.

"When people hear about Max's story, they're moved to want to help," Randell said.

"Max has been on TV and in the papers so much in his life, that each time there's more publicity, people become more aware. I'm amazed that every time there's a story, we hear from more new people."

Those new people that responded acted on their desire to help a cause that they believed was genuine. That support turned a contest that Randell never thought she would win into another goal to work toward.

"It didn't seem possible to win, so I put it out of my mind until they called and said I was one of seven finalists," Randell said. "Then, I decided I wanted to win."

Effective e-mail campaign

Randell and Shapiro-Nyeholt campaigned through e-mailing everyone they knew and asking for them to vote every day at www.dietrite.com.

The people they reached through e-mail, along with students at Buffalo Grove, Palatine and Fremd high schools and all other voters, earned the duo enough votes to win by what contest officials termed "a landslide."

The total prize money of \$50,000 -- \$25,000 to the original essay writer and \$25,000 to the Zero Boundaries Woman herself -- was just the amount of money that Canavan Research Illinois needed.

"Between 50 and 60 thousand dollars saves a year of research time because it buys one person that does nothing but work on Canavan for a year," Randell said.

With their prize money on the way to CRI's bank, Randell and her mother will continue working against Canavan disease like The Little Engine That Could until once again "I think I can, I think I can" creates success.