

WILMETTE LIFE

Youngster turns hobby into disease-fighting fund-raiser

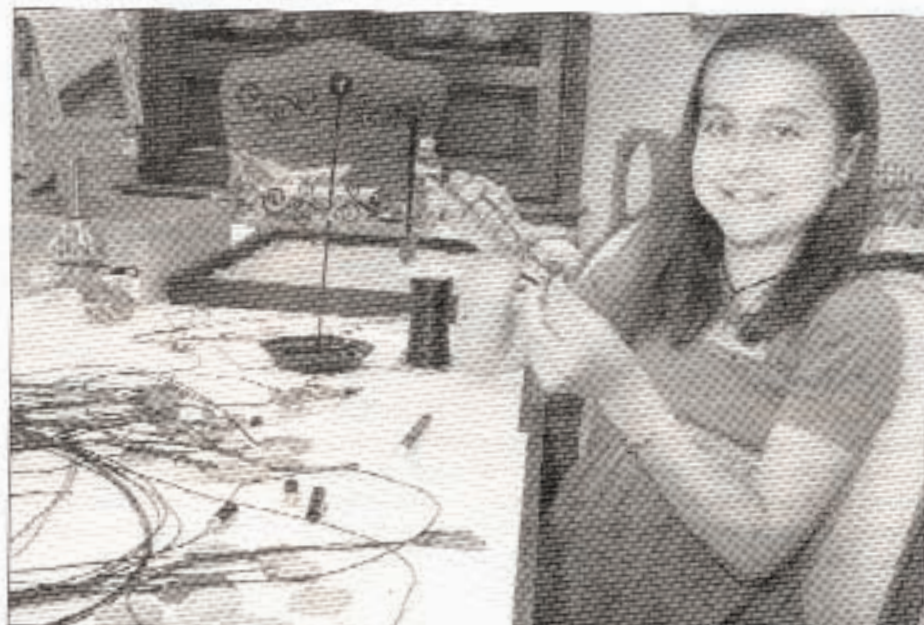
By KEN GOZE

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Sydney Martin has launched a personal war against a rare cancer-like blood disorder, and her weapon of choice is a bushel full of rocks.

The feisty 11-year-old from Wilmette turned her personal hobby of making handmade jewelry into a fund-raising powerhouse, raising nearly \$26,000 toward research of Langerhan's cell histiocytosis, an obscure and sometimes deadly disease that strikes mostly children.

At 8, she began making necklaces from flat stones culled from the beaches near her family's Michigan summer home, selling them for \$2 each as a kind of small-business venture. Back in the fall, as doctors first puzzled over her condition and then directed her chemotherapy, she de-



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Sydney Martin uses beach rocks to make handmade necklaces she sells to help fight histiocytosis, a rare blood disorder that strikes mostly children. Martin was diagnosed with the disease last September, but she remains in remission after chemotherapy. Through her efforts, Martin has raised nearly \$25,000 for research. "She has such a great attitude about wanting to help people," says Jeff Toughill, president of the Histiocytosis Association of America.

ecided to turn the venture into a cause, and turn it up a notch.

So far, she has produced and sold about 600 "Syd Rocks" necklaces.

Wanted to help kids

"I started selling them for \$15. I wanted to help for research because I wanted to help other kids in the future," Martin

said. "I thought I would only make \$500 or something."

Every dollar matters when it comes to histiocy-

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Sydney Martin, 11, of Wilmette displays the rock necklaces she makes and sells to raise money for research on histiocytosis, an obscure blood disorder that resembles cancer. Through her efforts, Martin has raised nearly \$25,000 for research. She is also a survivor of the disease.

Necklaces to get sold at festival

Sydney Martin of Wilmette plans to sell her necklaces at the Greater Chicago Jewish Folk Arts Festival, from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. June 15 at the Cook County Forest Preserve in Morton Grove, on

Oukton Street east of Waukegan Road.

The 11-year-old's necklaces also are available online at www.histo.org, the Web site of the Histiocytosis Association of America.

Hobby

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tosis, said Jeff Toughill, president of the Histiocytosis Association of America. The orphan disease strikes one in 200,000 people, so it doesn't draw large federal or drug company research grants, Toughill said.

The disease is caused

by an overabundance of histiocytes, which are part of a person's normal immune system. In histiocytosis, the cells run amok, clumping and attacking the body's own tissue. It can cause skin and bone lesions and damage organs and sometimes the brain and other parts of the central nervous system, Toughill said.

It's not classified as a true cancer, and it some-

times goes into remission by itself, but it's treated with cancer drugs, and it can cause long-term damage or death.

Harrowing experience

The family's journey began in September with a swelling on Sydney's face, which doctors at first thought was a sinus infection. After it failed to respond to antibiotics, a CT scan found an aggressive-looking lesion on her

skull near her eye socket.

Weeks of biopsies and other tests pinpointed her diagnosis, which resulted in six months of chemotherapy with cancer drugs and high doses of a steroid that often left Sydney feeling wired and jumpy.

Making necklaces and keeping an Internet blog that other affected children could read became positive outlets in a difficult time, Tracy Martin

said.

Toughill said the foundation gives out up to \$450,000 a year in research, and much of it depends on patients and families who become advocates for research.

"She has done an absolutely amazing job," Toughill said of Sydney. "She has such a great attitude about wanting to help people. It's inspiring, and it's inspiring to other kids as well."