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## Blythedale Providing 'A Sense of Normalcy'

### Hospital's School Brings Welcome Routine to Student-Patients

By Joan Gaylord

Mount Pleasant-Blythedale Union Free School District isn't a name that usually comes to mind when listing public school districts in Westchester County.

Yet, it is arguably the most remarkable.

On a recent morning, giggles and squeals spilled out of a primary-level classroom. Gathered in a circle around one of Blythedale's certified teachers, six young students counted the days of the week, calling out the numbers together. When they hesitated, the teacher nudged them along to the next number until they achieved their goal. Everyone cheered.

The scene is a familiar one in public schools all across Westchester. Yet it may only be at Blythedale that the students cheer while sitting in miniature wheelchairs or attached to a medical apparatus.

Though the colorful facility looks like most any suburban school, the space has been modified to accommodate the students' extraordinary needs. The wide hallways provide sufficient room for children to navigate safely with IV bags in tow. The overhead lights have been fitted with diffusers so children lying on stretchers are not staring up at bright lights all day. Yet, despite these modifications, the school is strikingly similar to any public school.

Housed in a sun-filled, two-story wing of Blythedale Children's Hospital, the school is a fully accredited K-12 New York State public school district that serves patients while they receive rehabilitative care.

"Children do not lose their right to a free and appropriate education just because they have had a medical catastrophe," said Ellen Bergman, the on-site district superintendent.

A clause in the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 provides the legal foundation for the Blythedale school. Commonly referred to as Section 504, the federal civil rights law guarantees that every child is able to continue their schooling to meet his or her needs. That includes children like those



JOAN GAYLORD PHOTO

Dimitria, a first-grader, with her teacher Stephen Slansky at a Mount Pleasant-Blythedale Union Free School class. The school serves children in grades K-12 who are recovering from illness or injury at Blythedale Children's Hospital.

at Blythedale, who attend school while recovering from organ transplant surgery or a traumatic brain injury or while receiving treatment for a seizure disorder or equally devastating medical diagnosis.

"Their number one job is simply being a child," explained Connie Cornell, the hospital's director of public relations. "School is understandable to children and parents. It provides a sense of normalcy."

In a high school English class, students gather around a table to read the next chapter in the young adult novel, "The Absolutely True Story of a Part-Time Indian." English teacher Jodi Feldman reads aloud portions of the book before initiating a class discussion.

Across the hall, students learn about the Great Pyramids of Egypt, part of the New York State global studies curriculum. They use standard texts but the teachers regularly supplement the curriculum with multi-sensory lessons such as carving an ancient Egyptian cuneiform alphabet on clay tablets. These lessons help meet

the educational needs of students whose abilities may have been compromised by their medical condition.

Blythedale is not a permanent placement for any of the students. The hospital's average patient stay is 50 days. Children enter with the expectation of moving on to a less restrictive environment, hopefully back home.

The students study the standard state curriculum. In the lower grades, the teachers help the students join the class at whatever point the lessons may be at the time of the child's admission. The school has structured, standing grades though they may combine grade levels depending upon the enrollment levels.

In the high school grades, Blythedale coordinates lessons with the students' home school districts. While hospitalized, high school students work toward a Regents diploma. If they achieve their goal while still a patient, Bergman said they participate in commencement exercises, complete with caps and gowns.

"The classes are unbelievable," said Kim

Zuzzolo, of Sleepy Hollow, whose six-year-old daughter, Mary, is a first-grader at Blythedale. "There will be 12 children in a class. Some students can't talk. Some can't walk. But the teachers will meet all their needs."

To assist the 26 special education teachers, Blythedale also employs 25 teaching assistants. In full compliance with state law, each child has an IEP, an individual education plan.

Zuzzolo said it is these services that make it possible for her daughter to attend school. Diagnosed with a mitochondrial condition that is so rare that Mary is believed to be one of only three children in the country with such a diagnosis, her doctors are still designing her treatment. While they address her medical issues, Mary joins her friends at school.

"This school is our light at the end of the tunnel," her mother said.

Across New York State, property taxes fund public school districts. Without this revenue stream, the Blythedale school receives federal and state education grants to pay for the academic programs. Children attend free of charge. If a young patient is a resident of another state, their home school district reimburses the facility for their education.

School isn't only about academics, so Blythedale seeks to bring the world to the students. This includes exposing them to the arts, including the theater, and allowing them to participate in taekwondo to the extent they are able. Government grants don't cover these opportunities so Bergman accepts that part of her job is "regularly begging for money."

"I try to find ways to pay for the experiences that make school fun," she said. "The parties, the special events, the performances."

Providing the students with fun experiences during the school day is just one of the many changes that Dr. Herbert Newman has witnessed during his 40 years as the school's attending pediatrician. Medical advances have made it possible for children to recover and participate in activities that he could barely have imagined when he first started his medical practice.

"We've seen amazing changes over the years," said Dr. Newman. "We now have kids who are post-heart transplant patients and they are going to school!"