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Compassion and caring to ill Billerica educator



By **RICK SOBEY** |

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BILLERICA — Melody Lee can no longer cruise down the street on her Harley-Davidson. She's unable to pick up items off the ground.

But what hurts the most for the 42-year-old is losing one of the favorite parts of her day.

"I can't hold these babies," said the executive director of The Learning Experience Academy of Early Education in Billerica, as tears steamed down her face on Tuesday. "I keep fighting, though, and hopefully we can see a miracle someday soon."

Lee was diagnosed in 2012 with systemic scleroderma, a debilitating, painful autoimmune disease that has become life-threatening. The disease leads to thickening of the skin caused by collagen accumulation, creating an excess buildup of scar tissue that affects the skin and internal organs.

While it's been gloomy at times, the Billerica preschool, with 170 children, has brightened her days.



Then the preschool hosted a dinner fundraiser on Nov. 16, as students, families and the community raised around \$9,000 for her stem-cell treatment.

“It’s a true inspiration to see what she’s been through,” said preschool teacher Danielle Decker. “We’ve pulled together as a big whole family and are constantly pulling for her.”

“Her attitude is simply amazing,” added Alana Powderly, early-education coordinator. “All the kids and parents love her. She’s unbelievably strong.”

Affecting about 300,000 Americans, the cause and cure for systemic scleroderma are still unknown; however, success stories have arisen from a clinical stem-cell trial held by Dr. Richard Burt at Northwestern University in Chicago.

After completing six months of chemotherapy and trial medications, Lee has been approved by Northwestern Memorial Hospital to undergo a stem-cell transplant and continue her fight.

“There is hope,” said Lee, who lives in Tyngsboro and grew up in Chelmsford. “Each day I continue to start my day at TLE (The Learning Experience Academy), and although my body may need a break from time to time, my spirit is stronger than ever.

“I dedicate my whole life to these kids,” added Lee, who oversees 34 “dynamic women” at the preschool. “What am I going to do? Sit home every day and turn to stone by myself? They’ve advised me to stay at home, but being here is too important. They rely on me.”

While she has health insurance, there are many expensive stem-cell procedures, tests and travel expenses that are not covered. In addition, she’s still working on getting the insurance company to approve the treatment; they’re hesitant because it’s considered a stem-cell “study.”

The preschool has a fundraising board in its lobby with a \$150,000 goal. If insurance does not

approve the treatment, then the cost would spike to \$250,000. More than \$70,000 has already been raised between the preschool and the community.

“If there is a silver lining in my diagnosis, it’s to provide a tangible example to the children on the impact of philanthropy,” Lee said. “Allowing children to become leaders in their community before even reaching elementary school is extremely gratifying.”

If Lee dies before the stem-cell treatment, the funds would be redistributed to people suffering from the disease.

Lee has been raising money through HelpHOPELive, a nonprofit that’s assisted transplant patients for 30 years. All donations are tax-deductible, held in the Northeast Stem Cell Transplant Fund, and administered by HelpHOPELive for only transplant-related expenses.

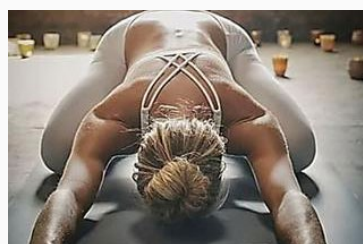
To make a donation, visit www.helphopelive.org and search for Melody Lee.

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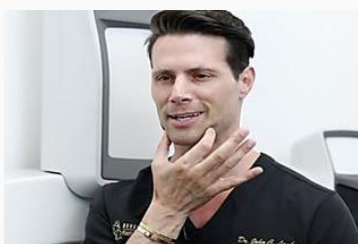
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