

Heart of GOLD

Highly rated doctor's charity awards patients with medals for their mettle

by Lacey Nix

It's 2 p.m. in the lobby at Riley Hospital for Children in Indianapolis. As children enter for the party, they hear music from a choir and see tables filled with toys, shirts, bags and crafts.

In the center of the room, hundreds of medals sparkle on a table. A 6-year-old boy in a wheelchair approaches the table with his parents. Alongside him stands an IV pole and four bags. He winces in pain when they stop, and his mom comforts him. She explains to volunteers that prior to the party, he saw only a hospital room for months. After a surgery, doctors approved the party visit to brighten his mood. He looks through the medals, each

from a marathon or half-marathon. He selects a Boston Marathon medal and a volunteer places it around his neck. For a brief moment, he forgets about the pain, looks down at his badge of honor and smiles.

Moments like these make the work involved in sourcing the medals worth the effort for volunteers, says Dr. Steve Isenberg, an A-rated ear, nose and throat specialist. He started his Indianapolis-based charity, Medals4Mettle, in 2005 after an emotional experience with a good friend changed him forever.

A day after finishing the Boston Marathon in 2003, Isenberg visited his friend, Les Taylor, in the hospital. Isenberg sat in the chair next to



Photo by Eldon Lindsay



Dr. Steve Isenberg meets with medal recipient Nigel Schonfeld. (Photo by Eldon Lindsay)

Taylor, who suffered from late-stage prostate cancer, and wished there was something he could do to lift Taylor's spirits. Then, he remembered the marathon medal in his pocket and had an idea. "I want you to have this," he told his friend as he placed the medal around his neck. "You are running a much more difficult marathon than the one I completed."

Before Taylor passed away, he told Isenberg how much the medal meant to him. His words inspired Isenberg to start the organization that collects runners' medals and donates them to people battling debilitating illnesses and who demonstrate courage and mettle in fighting for survival.

Isenberg runs the charity out of his office, which overflows with medals and countless letters of thanks. It's how many of Isenberg's

volunteers, like member Sally Powell, first learned about the charity.

In the waiting room, Powell read letters from parents and kids thanking Isenberg for their medals. During the visit, she said she'd love to help. Even though he explained that it's a volunteer-based organization with no pay and they needed someone almost full time, she left her job of 35 years and never looked back. "Medals4Mettle has been the highlight of my life," she says.

Powell, one of more than 70 coordinators across the country, helps to collect medals, raise money to buy colorful ribbons for the gifted medals, award medals in their communities and spend time furthering the mission. Nearly 10 years after Isenberg founded the charity, its reach continues to

expand, with over 70 chapters in the U.S. and six overseas. Isenberg says Medals4Mettle has grown so much that additional funds are being raised to hire employees and establish an office large enough to handle the volume of donated medals.

Powell estimates thousands of runners donate their earned medals each year. "The earned part is important," Powell says. Runners train at length to finish marathons. "Sick people are running their own marathon, pushing themselves to survive."

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Dr. Steve Isenberg

Isenberg's passion radiates when he shares stories of the patients he's met, such as Nigel Schonfeld, a 17-year-old battling bone marrow failure. Schonfeld played football, wrestled and ran track for his high school until his parents noticed unusual spots on his skin. Doctors admitted him to Riley Hospital, where he stayed 72 days.

As a former athlete, Schonfeld says he knows how much effort the runners spend training. "For kids like me, it's hard to live a normal life," Schonfeld says. "When people see the courage it takes and constant battle we fight and recognize it with a sacrifice, it's something very



Photo by Eldon Lindsay

special." Schonfeld's prognosis is promising and he hopes to run track again and possibly earn a medal he can donate. "I just want to keep going and keep fighting," he says.

Isenberg knows that not all patients' stories have happy endings — it's the nature of the work they're in. "The medal isn't just for the patient," Isenberg says. "It's for their families that fight alongside them and sacrifice so much to be there."

Myra Henry of Scottsburg, Ind., knows all too well how much these medals mean. Her grandson, Brandon, passed away after his body rejected a liver transplant. Henry says he wore his medal during surgeries and when he felt pain. Today, the medal hangs in her living room, along with a photo of Brandon. "I see that and know that if he had the courage to keep going, then I can too."^B



ONLINE

For more information on the charity, visit www.medals4mettle.org