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## **Danville boy urges diabetes awareness with 'Get the Flock Out of Here!'**

Blue flamingos on local lawns share 11-year-old's story, ask for donations to support research

by Kalama Hines

Life as an 11 year-old seems so easy. A few hours of school followed by several hours of play. Usually no burdening tasks or life-altering duties.

For Danville's Wyatt French, however, everyday life includes seven or more daily needle pricks as an absolute necessity, constant measuring of carbohydrate intake and possession of a kit that carries a striking resemblance to a fanny pack.

"When my blood sugar is low, I feel weak and tired, it is hard to concentrate and I have to take a break from playing," said Wyatt, who has Type 1 diabetes. "I can't even walk because that will lower my blood sugar."

The Charlotte Wood Middle School sixth-grader is now spreading his story across town, trying to increase awareness about the disease and raise funds for vital research -- all with the help of some colorful plastic birds popping up around Danville.

"When you see blue flamingos around Danville, think of me and finding a cure for Type 1 diabetes," he said.

Through the "Get the Flock Out of Here!" campaign, Wyatt and his mother, Jennifer French, have taken an hour or so each night since November to set up plastic flamingos -- painted blue to represent diabetes awareness -- in the yards of a handful of Danville residents.

Accompanying the "flocking" is a campaign sign, a message detailing Wyatt's story and a brief description of the disease and how it impacts the lives of those suffering from it.

The note concludes with calls to donate to the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation (JDRF) and to nominate the next home to receive a flamingo flock.

The Frenches said they do four yards per night -- with eight flamingos each -- and leave blue birds outside the homes for one day. They pick the flamingos up the next night, replace them with a thank-you note from Wyatt and then deliver the flock to the newly nominated yards.

"He (came) up with (the idea) on his own," Jennifer said. "We were thinking of something to do that was special for Diabetes Awareness Month ... He liked the flamingo idea."

The objective is not just to inform the masses, which he feels is widely misinformed, but also to raise money for the JDRF. The French family has collected \$3,800 worth of donations as of Friday -- a total that has garnered notice from the foundation itself.

"We've gotten a couple calls from the (JDRF) corporate office, thanking us for doing this, and that was really cool for Wyatt," Jennifer said.

While Wyatt said he is excited at the idea of wide-spread recognition and is open to the foundation's idea of possibly expanding the flock program, the actions were born from humble beginnings.

"Get The Flock Out Of Here!" was originally inspired by Wyatt's exasperation with constantly having to explain himself to others, he said.

Having to explain to his classmates that he is not carrying a fanny pack, but his "kit" in which he keeps the tools necessary to regularly check his glucose levels. Having to explain to everyone he meets what his OmniPod Insulin Management System (a device that constantly distributes insulin into his blood stream) is and why he needs to keep it attached to his body.

For Jennifer, seeing the struggle from a parent's point of view continues to inspire her. Understanding the common misconceptions, having seen them first-hand, she said she hopes to help others who may at some point be faced with diabetes.

Among the misinformation she carried into Wyatt's diagnosis at age 5 was the idea that only unhealthy and inactive kids who over-indulged in sugary foods, or had a genetic or hereditary predisposition, could contract diabetes. That is not the case.

There is no clear cause for Type 1 diabetes, she said, and it can be so difficult to understand that even after spending several days in the hospital, newly diagnosed families leave lacking a clear understanding. She likened the experience to departing the hospital with a newborn infant.

"(The hospital) kicks you out and they're like, 'good luck,'" Jennifer recalled. "You need to educate yourself really fast."

She added that another mistake she made, upon returning with her newly diagnosed diabetic, was clearing out the house of all sugary or carbohydrate-laden foods.

"Now we know better," she said. "He can eat anything, as long as he boluses with insulin ... It's that sort of thing that people don't really understand."

Jennifer also urges everyone to watch for symptoms of diabetes, which she describes as being very similar to flu-like symptoms. Dehydration, weight loss, shakiness and needle-sticking pain in the abdominal region are all warning signs, Jennifer and Wyatt said.

Having been acknowledged by the JDRF for his strength in the face of adversity, the 11-year-old Danville native said he will continue his work. Through the difficulties presented by his Type 1 diabetes, Wyatt said he will press on, spreading the word of his and others' struggles living with disease.

He added it's his dream that one day diabetes will be cured for the approximately 29.1 million Americans suffering from the disease, including about 1.25 million who have Type 1, according to the National Diabetes Statistics Report.

To get involved with "Get The Flock Out Of Here!" (which has now expanded to include a Utah family) or to donate to the Frenches' support for the JDRF, contact Jennifer French at [JenniferFrench72@gmail.com](mailto:JenniferFrench72@gmail.com).