



(Jean Bartlett photo)

Representing the Pacifica Lions Club, the Pacifica Moose Lodge, Pacifica American Legion Post 238 and Pacifica Beta Sigma Phi Sororities, Kayla's fundraising team presents Kayla's grandmother, Mickey Montgomery, a check. Back row, l to r: Dennis Burke, Debbie Blanchard, Mary Clarkson, Greg Stepanenko and Vern Alonzo. Front row, l to r: Bando Bonilla, Jodi Bonilla, Arnie Benjamin, Mickey Montgomery, Maye Williams-Stiff, Rich Russitano and Shirlee Gibbs.

Locals dig deep for little Kayla

YOU CAN STILL HELP THIS FAMILY IN NEED

By Jean Bartlett
Tribune Writer

It began with a haircut.

"Betty Benjamin came in and saw the picture I keep at work of my granddaughter."

"Grandma" is Mickey Montgomery. A native Pacifican, Montgomery has been a hairstylist for almost 50 years. "I told Mrs. Benjamin about Kayla."

A third generation Pacifican on her grandmother's side, Kayla Wong, 4, went from a 2-year-old running down the hallway, to a little girl unable to move within a 15-minute span of time. Rushed to the hospital, placed on a ventilator, given a tracheostomy, Kayla was paralyzed from the neck down.

Kayla was diagnosed with Acute Flaccid Myelitis (AFM). It affects the nervous system, specifically the spinal cord. It is rare. In 2014, only 120 cases were reported across the U.S. Its symptoms are similar to complications of infection with certain viruses, such as poliovirus and West Nile virus. Its cause is unknown.



After three months of living with Kayla at the hospital, Kayla's mom, Sabrina Byrne, brought Kayla home to Pacifica. Both Kayla's mom and Kayla's dad, Dennis Wong, have learned to meet many of Kayla's medical needs. A nurse also comes daily. Kayla, who no longer has a tracheostomy and has good neck movement now, is smart and funny and loves butterflies, birds, the beach and her iPad, the latter which she operates with a hat stylus. She has digestive issues and is still tube fed. She has some problems with her lungs and her bladder. There are many unknowns. Her family struggles.

With what she learned that day, Betty Benjamin told Kayla's grandmother she would ask her husband to find a way to help. Betty's husband is longtime Pacifica Lion Arnie Benjamin. Currently serving as the local nonprofit's 3rd Vice President, Arnie told his fellow Lions about Kayla and her family. As it happened, Lion Shirlee Gibbs, Immediate Past President, had also just heard about Kayla.

"The idea of a fundraising benefit had been suggested earlier to me by Flo Dickow," Gibbs said. "Flo is a member of Beta Sigma Phi and she had become aware of the difficulties Kayla and her family face."

Arnie and Shirlee shared their information with fellow Lions and the response to help was unanimous. Lion Alan Hale, 1st Vice President, who is also the Adjutant for Pacifica American Legion Post 238, offered the Legion Hall for a spaghetti dinner with a silent auction. The Lions Club agreed to sponsor the July 1 Benefit for Kayla, and Gibbs signed on as coordinator. Through the Pacifica Tribune, the Lions got out an address where funds could be sent in support of Kayla.

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"We are very indebted to the Moose Lodge," Gibbs said. "They offered their own facility to host the event and they provided the salads, the dishes and the utensils, and they even provided the dishwashers. Some of their members brought silent auction gifts and provided auctioneering help."

On the day of the fundraiser, members of the Pacifica Lions Club, the Pacifica Moose Lodge, Pacifica American Legion Post 238 and Pacifica Beta Sigma Phi Sororities were there with their sleeves rolled up. Lions and Moose member Debbie Blanchard washed dishes and helped with setup. Dennis Burke, Past District Commander for American Legion, District 26, served as chef. He prepared the sauce, cooked 48 pounds of spaghetti and sliced the sourdough bread for over 200 diners. Get it done workers also included: Mary Clarkson, Maye Williams-Stiff and Flo Dickow (Beta Sigma Phi); Commander Greg Stepanenko, and Sergeant-at-Arms and Past Commander Vern Alonzo (American Legion Post 238); Bando Bonilla, Jodi Bonilla and Rich Russitano (Pacifica Moose Lodge); and Shirlee Gibbs, Arnie Benjamin and Allan Hale (Lions).

"When you find out you can help a life, you've got to do it," Arnie Benjamin said.

On Thursday evening, August 2, the four service organizations presented Kayla's grandmother a check for \$13,119. (The organizations absorbed all expenses. Every dollar donated went to Kayla.)

Montgomery, clearly overwhelmed by her community's generosity, thanked everyone. She said the money will be used to help Kayla with needed swim therapy and physical therapy. It will also go to some home remodeling. Currently Kayla's mom carries her growing daughter down two sets of stairs. This gift will change that.

"There's an old Moose saying that to me really explains what all of us were so happy to do," said Moose Administrator Rich Russitano. "A burden heavy to one is borne lightly by many."

Donations may still be made: payable to Kayla's grandmother, Marilyn Montgomery; noted "Kayla's Fund;" and mailed to the Pacifica Lions Club, P.O. Box 1132, Pacifica, CA 94044.

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