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JUST THE MEDICINE FOR SICK YOUNGSTERS: 'KIDS THAT CARE'

■ A young philanthropist received a national award for running a kid-staffed program serving critically ill children at Jackson Memorial Hospital.

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Kyle Amber remembers the day his father picked him up late from the playground and told him the gut-wrenching news: His older brother Ian had leukemia and could need a bone marrow transplant — a risky procedure that few South Florida hospitals performed at the time.

Kyle, then 5, hatched what seemed a reasonable plan: He'd raise the cash to build a

transplant unit for his brother himself.

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•TURN TO KIDS, 26A



TIM CHAPMAN/HERALD STAFF

A DECADE OF SUCCESS: Kyle Amber, 16, right, started a nonprofit to help his brother, Ian.

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School of Medicine in the News >>

December 19, 2005: Just the Medicine for Sick Youngsters: "Kids that Care"

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"I collected this money," he told the receptionist, "and I would like to buy a bone marrow transplant unit."

"People were like, 'Wow, this kid is crazy,'" Kyle recalled. "It was like, 'Why can't you accept that someone younger is trying to help make a difference?'"

Eleven years, \$100,000 and hundreds of young critically-ill patients later, Kyle, now 16, is running "Kids That Care," the only entirely kid-staffed and kid-serving nonprofit group at Jackson Memorial Hospital.

Its mission is to help other sick kids the way his brother said they needed it most: with toys and a laugh -- things kids want, not just what doctors say they might need.

"I just saw what my brother was going through," Kyle explained. "Instead of just sitting there and being sad about it, I wanted to do something."

Last week Kyle was one of 12 Americans, chosen from thousands of nominees, to receive the Caring Award in Washington, D.C. The prize, begun in 1988 to honor and promote public service nationwide, includes a \$2,000 scholarship for Kyle and four other winners younger than 19.

"It's quite significant for someone so young to have done so much and to have inspired so many," Val Halamandaris, executive director of the Caring Institute, said of Kyle. "He really makes you feel good about the future of our country."

Kyle and Ian's Pinecrest childhood was once full of museum trips and dinner-table civics talk with their parents -- both lawyers for local nonprofit groups.

But all that changed in 1994, when Ian, then 10, was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia, a blood cancer now fatal among children about 20 percent of the time.

Although Ian never had to undergo a bone marrow transplant, he did undergo more than two years of chemotherapy. All the time, Kyle would pop up at his bedside making funny faces, trying to cheer him up with a laugh.

"He felt really helpless. You're there, you see your brother sick, your parents upset," mother Laurie Amber recalled. "He needed to do something for himself, because everything was channeled around Ian."

With help from a growing group of young volunteers, Kyle set out to maximize the main asset of a child-run charity: insight into its young peers.

Ian, meanwhile, advised from the frontlines of disease. Critically ill children wanted games to play, not books to study, he reported -- so Kids That Care raised and spent thousands of dollars on toys.

Skeptics, Kyle said, "just kept me going. One group would say, 'No, you can't do that,' and so I'd go to five more" to raise cash, he recalled.

Now, every needle stick at Jackson's clinic warrants a gift from an "Ouch Box" of toys set out to ease pain -- a tactic Ian's parents used during his chemo 10 years ago. Kyle delivers donated loot by the crate, often dressed in a yellow Smiley-face suit.

An annual essay contest the brothers devised also awards four kids \$500 to buy whatever they want. Honesty is preferred: winning entries tend to request LEGOs, not treasury bonds, Kyle said.

"You have to hold a kid to a different standard than a national philanthropist," Ian said. "Just never give up: That's the most important mantra you can think in anything you do."

Today, Ian is healthy, 21 and studying medicine at the University of Miami. Jackson Memorial opened its own pediatric bone marrow transplant unit in 1996. Donating marrow, Ian wants people to know, is much less painful or risky than it was a decade ago.

As for Kyle, now a junior at Palmetto Senior High: He hopes to become a doctor, too, but isn't planning on giving up Kids That Care, not even when he's no longer a kid himself.

If, somehow, he's ever too old to know what kids want, he promises he'll defer to younger minds. Their input, in the end, is what his group is all about.

"Adults want to think they're the only ones who can do something," he said. "I'm like, 'No! kids can do it, too!'"



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