Rubber Band Bracelets Bring Smiles, Hope To Cancer Patients

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HARTFORD — Although rubber band bracelets are a trend at their school, Keeley Joyal and Lindsay Masamery had more than fashion in mind when they started making the bracelets by the dozen.

On Thursday, the two girls went to Hartford Hospital to deliver nearly 500 of the bracelets to cancer patients.

Each bracelet, made by weaving together colorful rubber bands, was made by Keeley, Lindsay or one of their peers at Somers Elementary School and had an inspirational message attached.

The idea for the bracelets began when Keeley's mother, Katie, was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer in May. The only piece of jewelry Katie Joyal could safely wear to treatment was a rubber bracelet. So Keeley decided to start a bracelet-making club.

Keeley, 10, involved best friend Lindsay, 11. The two live across the street from one another in Somers and have been friends since birth. They share a special bond, both having been affected by cancer. Lindsay's mother, Julie, was diagnosed with stage three breast cancer in 2009 and is currently in remission. Katie Joyal continues to undergo treatment.

With the help of Keeley's fifth-grade teacher, Tenley Stoltz, the girls started "The Bouncing Back Club." They put up posters at school and sent letters home, asking students to make bracelets. The school collection boxes were soon full. Students gathered the bracelets during lunch to attach notes saying "Thinking of you," "Lots of smiles to you" and other kind thoughts.

"We wanted to raise the school's cancer awareness," Lindsay said. "I think it's good that patients will be happier because someone is thinking of them."

Keeley added that they plan to bring the club to middle school in the fall and Stoltz will continue it at the elementary school. The girls also placed a collection box at the public library to gather donations over the summer.

"They're such special girls," Stoltz said. "They're able to think outside of themselves at 10 and 11, so I can't wait to see where they'll go from here."

The girls decided to bring the bracelets to Hartford Hospital because Julie Masamery is a nurse on the surgical floor there. Masamery shared the idea with Abbi Bruce, regional director of the Hartford Healthcare Cancer Institute, who was excited by the prospect. She said it was a sweet gesture to remind patients they are not alone.

During their visit to the hospital, Keeley and Lindsay handed out bracelets to several patients. Among them was Donata Banks, who has stage four breast cancer. She picked a purple bracelet with the message "Good luck to you."

Calvin Henderson was undergoing chemotherapy for leukemia when he picked out a bracelet that read "Get well soon."

Andrew Salner, medical director of the cancer center, said he was impressed by the girls’ creativity and compassion. An act like this "really enriches the lives" of cancer patients, he said.
"What a great thing to take an experience that is traumatic, like your mother being diagnosed with cancer, and turn it into an expression of love," Salner said.

Bill Grady, one of the recipients of the bracelets, has been battling brain cancer for eight years. He picked out an aqua blue bracelet, saying it reminded him of Caribbean waters.

"I loved the support of having these girls come here today," Grady said. "There is a part of dealing with cancer that you can't dispute, and that is the value when people wish you well. We all need that."