



# Giggles Theater gives hospitalized kids hope

Thursday, February 10, 2005

By **JESSICA ADLER**  
**HERALD NEWS**

In the hallway of St. Joseph's Children's Hospital in Paterson, 38 fourth- and fifth-graders in gray, pleated slacks and red bow ties stood in two lines, waiting to perform. A few feet away, in the "green room," Sidiki Conde hoisted himself from his wheelchair into a cushioned seat and changed from cargo pants and a sweater into traditional African garb.

Conde and the dapper-looking Newark Boys Chorus were the main attractions at Wednesday's official opening of St. Joe's Giggles Theater - a place to give pediatric patients a break from the sometimes grim reality of hospital life.

Inside the theater sat five young patients, connected to beeping, flashing IV monitors. They were in the hospital because they had to be. Kayla Kuchta, 6, had an especially bad asthma attack. Kahlil Tosea, 18, was in to visit a neurologist. Fifteen-year-old Nadia Elmahdy's blood sugar had risen dangerously high. For the kids, the show was a welcome digression from fluorescent lights, cartoon reruns and DVDs of "Newlyweds." (Nadia watched an entire season's worth of Jessica Simpson and Nick Lachey's married life three times over two days.)

"When children are in the hospital, they're scared to death, and they're bored to death," said Frank Brady, founder and chairman of the theater's funding organization, Medical Missions for Children, a nonprofit that seeks to elevate the care of catastrophically ill children.

Nadia, of Paterson, knows all about the fear.

Doctors told her she's a candidate for dialysis if she's not more careful about monitoring her blood sugar. So watching chubby-cheeked, wide-eyed boys harmonize is a respite from that scary possibility.

But her favorite part of the show came when Conde took the stage. He lost the use of his legs at age 14.

He never believed those who told him it was due to polio. "I say it was God," he said, before the show, eyes sparkling, smile wide. "God wanted to see me like this."

On stage, Conde alternated between playing a djembae drum and dancing across the stage, his hands acting as legs, his dreadlocks tossed about by his rhythmic movement.

"Everybody looks different," he said to the audience between songs.

"Some walk the floor, some don't walk the floor. That doesn't mean you're handicapped. Whatever you have, you have to be happy with that."

After the show, Nadia seemed to catch Conde's vibe. She thought of what she's been through since being diagnosed five years ago: the kids at school who ask if diabetes is contagious, the tedium of going in and out of the

hospital.

"He has a disability that everyone sees and it doesn't seem to bother him," she said. "He didn't stop doing what he wants to do."

Inspiration and hope are two big themes of Giggles Theater, but there's another goal, too. Medical Missions links 27 "mentoring" hospitals, including St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center, to hospitals in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

The organization hopes to broadcast shows to hospitals across the United States and the world, using the same technology with which it facilitates education between medical professionals.

Eventually, it plans to sponsor "field trips" via satellite connection. On March 8, for example, kids can "dive" with sharks at MOTE Aquarium in Florida.

"Instead of helping one kid," said Brady, of Medical Missions, "we're trying to help thousands and thousands."

Reach Jessica Adler |at (973) 569-7169 or [adler@northjersey.com](mailto:adler@northjersey.com).

**Copyright © 2005 North Jersey Media Group Inc.**

[Copyright Infringement Notice](#) [User Agreement & Privacy Policy](#)