

Giving in style

Hair salons help raise money for children who lose their locks

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Stylist Janna Chrissis of Mirage Hair Studio fits Heather Daly, an 11-year-old with hyperthyroidism and alopecia, with new hair. **PHOTO: BRIAN DAVIES/THE REGISTER-GUARD**

days at a time and through even strenuous workouts without slipping.

"We knew how realistic it was when she went back for her next chemotherapy treatment and the doctors and nurses were surprised that her hair hadn't fallen out yet," Deborah Wright recalls. "I told her social worker about it, and the worker said most families wouldn't be able to afford it. When I told Staci that, she said, 'Mom, that's just not fair,' and that's how she came up with the idea for the foundation."

Up to now, Angel Hair has raised most of its money "from us basically leaning on our family and friends for donations," Wright said. But now, the foundation is turning to the public, with a "Styles for Smiles" event on Saturday, during which eight area salons will donate 15 percent of their hair service revenue to Angel Hair. Those salons and nine more also will have donation boxes out all week to collect additional money.

"We chose this week because there are three local high school proms Saturday night and Mother's Day on Sunday, so the salons will be busy," Wright said. "We're so grateful that so many want to participate."

The trauma of losing hair to life-threatening or chronic disease is not a matter of vanity, Wright said. "When these children have the confidence of knowing that they look normal and that other people react to them normally, they actually feel better and recover more quickly."

Heather Daly's mother, Claudia Daly, said that was the case with her daughter.

"She was pretty stoic about losing her hair — it happened in a period of just a few weeks — but I know it really hurt her," Claudia Daly said. "It was very difficult for her to explain what was happening to her peers, even though she's been with these children since kindergarten, and they all have been very understanding. It's been hard for me, as a parent, to find the balance of strength and compassion to help her through this."

Imagine being an 11-year-old girl whose hair suddenly falls out from a double-whammy of hyperthyroidism and alopecia, both auto-immune reactions that tell your body that hair is its enemy.

Imagine sitting in the chair at a beauty salon a few weeks later and covering your bald head with a state-of-the-art "hair system" that miraculously looks and feels like the hair that you loved and used to take for granted.

Heather Daly, a fifth-grader at Hoover Elementary in Corvallis, doesn't have to imagine any of it: She did lose her hair, but now, thanks to a Eugene nonprofit organization called the Angel Hair Foundation, she can look in the mirror and almost believe her nightmare never happened.

Daly is the 40th Oregon child to receive — free of charge — a replacement head of hair through the foundation, the brainchild of Eugene teenager Staci Wright, who lost her own reddish locks to chemotherapy treatments after cancer surgery two years ago.

"I was really sad when it happened to me," Wright said as she watched Heather's fitting. "When my hair started falling out, I didn't want to go out anywhere or do anything."

In fact, says her mother, Deborah Wright, "Staci said she felt everyone was looking at her, and she said she didn't want to go out in public again. We would have flown anywhere and paid anything to help her get through this."

Through a friend who also had experienced hair loss, the Wrights found their solution — a \$1,500 hair prosthesis indistinguishable from real hair and designed to fit snugly on a bald head for



Heather Daly checks out her new look after the fitting.

Just minutes after Janna Chrissis, owner of the Mirage Hair Studio at Eugene's Oakway Center, finished fitting Heather's new cranial hair prosthesis, the child sat in the salon chair gently running a comb through her new, shoulder-length hairpiece. Heather had missed six weeks of school as she began treatment for her debilitating hyperthyroid condition, but the day after she received her hair system, she said she felt much better and wanted to return to the classroom.

Ironically, she went without her new hair, "because we were still working with it, to get it styled the way she wants it," Claudia Daly said. "But obviously, something clicked. Just having the option to wear it took a lot of pressure off her — she knows she can wear it when she needs to have it on. Knowing that got her over the hurdle of returning to the classroom after all this time."

If the Wrights are the head of the Angel Hair Foundation, Chrissis — who has been working with people with hair loss for eight years — is its hands, personally overseeing the custom fitting for each child the foundation approves.

"I take precise measurements of each child's head, and then they choose the style and color they want from a catalog," she said. "When the hair system arrives, we do their fitting and teach them how to use and care for the hair. The prosthetics come in certain basic styles, so if they want theirs cut or styled in a different way, we do that during the fitting. If they decide later that they want it changed or shorter, we do that, too."

The hair systems she prefers come in a choice of human hair or "Cyberhair," a patented synthetic fiber that looks and feels like hair but is lighter weight and more durable, Chrissis said.

The skull cap is made of a filmy lightweight layer like a second skin, with the hair or Cyberhair woven through it so it looks like a human scalp, she said. "There are silicon strips at the edge of the cap, and those warm up from body heat and make a really strong seal. If you want even more, you can use adhesive strips that allow you to wear it for days at a time. It's easier for kids to use Cyberhair, easier for them to take care of."

Her salon offers a full range of regular, "trendy cuts and colors" as well as the three consultation rooms reserved for helping adults and children who have lost their hair, Chrissis said. "I just have a passion for these people. I want to help them get through it."