

Making Life Bearable

Written by Judi Duggan

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Taylor Crabtree has donated more than 20,000 bears so far to children afflicted with cancer

At first glance, Taylor Crabtree is a pretty unassuming kid, playing volleyball, wearing out her MP3 player, addicted to "Desperate Housewives." But when you "bear" in mind all that this young woman has accomplished so far in her short lifetime, it's natural to be awestruck by her and to reflect on how little most of us have done to help people in need by comparison.

Crabtree was only 7 years old when her life changed drastically, touched at a young age by a devastating illness. Her grandmother was diagnosed with colorectal cancer, and she witnessed first hand the pain and agony that many face. She began to think about how this might feel to a young child afflicted with the same, life-threatening disease, and quickly moved into action.

"I saw how hard cancer was on my grandmother," she said. "I started to think about the effects it would have on children's bodies. Because it was tough for my grandmother, I

thought about how scared [kids] must feel because everything that happens to them is so foreign. Medicine, needles, strange places, being taken away from your parents during some procedures. It's very scary. I think that I must have put it all together in one huge idea and that was how TayBear started. It was just an idea that I wanted to give a teddy bear for them to hug while they were fighting their cancer. I wanted them to know that someone, even a stranger, cared about them."

"TayBear," named after its creator, started as a small idea. Crabtree and her mother used to make hair clips for Crabtree to wear during gymnastics. They were so nice that Crabtree decided to make some on her own and sell them to others. "When it started out it was almost Halloween and my mom thought I was trying to get an early start on making money for Christmas presents," Crabtree explained. "She hadn't quite understood that I wasn't planning on keeping the money. I don't keep any money; it all goes to buying teddy bears. My parents encouraged me but I had to figure out how to do things on my own. They said that they would take me wherever I needed to go but that this was my project and it must come from my heart. I learned to count money by adding donations and to write a check when I was 8 years old, and how to walk up to a total stranger and explain to them that they really needed to help my project."

Crabtree, now 15, has sold more than 12,000 hair clips to date. She uses the proceeds plus donations made to her TayBear company to buy teddy bears, which she customizes then donates to children who have been diagnosed with cancer. Not only does she donate the bears, but she goes out of her way to donate many of these bears herself, and to talk and listen with the children who are the focus of her efforts.

"I became more and more committed to my project as I met more and more kids," she said. "One day I was in a hospital in Chicago and I gave a bear to a boy named Ryan. He was about 13 years old and didn't look like he wanted the bear. He maybe felt too old but asked if he could give it to his sister; she spends a lot of time in the hospital. I said the TayBear is his to decide. I got an email from Ryan's dad 10 days later. He said how Ryan never gave his TayBear to his sister. That his TayBear never left his side and he came back for tests because his cancer had returned. By the end of the first week, his dad told me how Ryan caught an infection and how hard that is on cancer patients. By the end of the weekend, Ryan had died. Ryan's dad told me how much he loved his TayBear and that he was with him at every moment and that they decided to bury them together. I looked at the time the email was sent. It was 4:15 a.m. This dad wanted to share with me how important Ryan's TayBear was to him while he was going through so much pain himself."

The effort that started as a single-child process has grown into something even Crabtree couldn't have dreamed of and, as a consequence, has taught her invaluable lessons, and provided her with inspiration to continue. With a busy teenage life that includes studies, volleyball, and other normal activities, she also coordinates every aspect of her now booming business, which boasts over 1,200 volunteers, and still finds the time to correspond personally to each of her benefactors through e-mails, phone calls and deliveries. To date, she has donated more than 20,000 bears to children in their time of need, and learned to balance a precarious lifestyle that keeps her moving almost 24/7.

"I work hard to keep a balance between the important things in my life: family, friends, TayBear, volleyball and school. I don't believe my life is less because I didn't go someplace with my friends because I had made a commitment to deliver bears or have a bear hug party. I feel it is so much better for having met some amazing kids who are being challenged literally with life and death. I'm doing what I feel I should be doing. When you spend time helping others it's not what you have lost it's what you have gained."

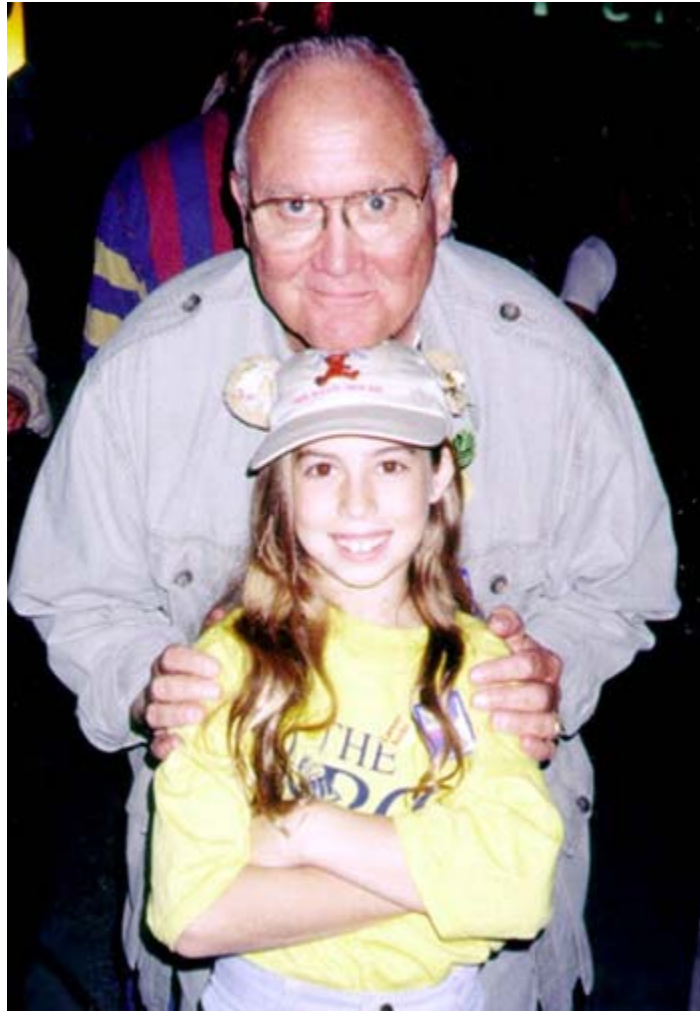
With a vast majority of her time going to her business, Crabtree also finds time to train, and train hard, to become a better volleyball player. She plays high school at La Costa Canyon of Carlsbad, California, and club volleyball for Carlsbad Surf 17's, and was recently a selection for the High Performance team.



Crabtree's passion extends to volleyball as well, where she is a setter for Carlsbad Surf 17s "We scouted her when she was on the La Costa Canyon High School JV team," said Carlsbad Surf coach Mark Tanner. "It was apparent that she had good hands and good quickness. She played for us in try-outs; I knew we had something special. She has exceptional hands and exceptional quickness She is going to be fun to watch. From a coach's standpoint, she is totally 'coachable' and she wants to learn, and is a great addition to our team."

Added Crabtree's self-appointed hero, Paula Weishoff, who first spotted her talent during an HP SCVA tryout: "Taylor is just one of those exceptional kids both on and off the court. As a volleyball player Taylor is always looking for ways to improve and get better. She is the type of kid that will go to physical training in the morning, come early to afternoon practice, and then want to play in the evening. Taylor is the first to encourage her teammates and will blame herself first before ever putting blame on another player or coach."

A setter, Crabtree trains three days a week with her club team, works with a personal trainer five days per week, and travels to train and compete with the High Performance team, as well, all this while maintaining a 4.0 GPA. She continues to persevere and look ahead to the horizon. When asked what she wants to do with her life next, she said, "I think that right now I should just challenge myself and try new things. People have to be willing to make mistakes and look stupid. With each experience I'll learn what I'm good at and what I enjoy. You also find out what you're really bad at. But I also don't think that I should be limited to just one thing. Why not two or three or even four things? Remember... don't set limits."



**Crabtree with General Norman Schwarzkopf at
The March on cancer in Washington D.C.**

Crabtree's selflessness and devotion to others has taken her to places that would give many of us great trepidation. She has given speeches to crowds of almost 15,000 people, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C., met with high-ranking political officials, and has taken her voice to anyone who will listen, to promote herself, her business, and more importantly, to motivate others to do the same.

Crabtree has a strong hope that there will one day be a cure for cancer, and there will no longer be a need for her business. But until then, she keeps going, all cylinders firing, knowing that she is making a difference in so many lives.

To join Crabtree in helping kids with cancer or to learn more about TayBear, please visit www.taybearhugs.org.