Beads of Courage

Small beads have big impact for pediatric cancer patient.

For thousands of years and in cultures across the world, beads have had a wide variety of uses and significance. They've carried value, having been traded for items such as pelts, spices or gold. They've had every-day uses, such as prayer tools, counting tools, or weights. They've signified strength and courage, protecting heroes on quests or long journeys.

Today, most of us don't equate beads with thoughts of significance. We wear them as jewelry or use them to create craft projects. But for pediatric oncology/hematology patients, beads have great significance as proud symbols of their fight against cancer and blood disorders.

Beads of Courage, Inc. is a non-profit organization committed to strengthening resilience and promoting the well-being of children coping with serious illness, their families, and the clinicians who care for them. Since the organization started in 2003, it has established programs at more than 240 hospitals in eight countries.

Through the program children tell their story of their journey using colorful beads as meaningful symbols of courage that they receive to honor and acknowledge each step of their treatment. At the beginning of treatment, children are given a string of beads that spells their name. With each treatment or procedure, beads are given according to a program specific program bead guide. They may receive a blue bead for a clinic visit, a yellow bead for overnight stays in the hospital or a glow-in-the dark bead for a radiation treatment. Other beads may be given for encouragement, such as a Fish Bead that signifies long distance travel for care or an "upstream battle." For milestones in their treatment journey, they receive handmade one-of-a-kind glass beads. The most symbolic are the Purple Heart Bead, signifying the end of cancer treatment, and the glass Butterfly Bead, which is given to a child's family if the child loses the battle against cancer.

When strung together, the beads form a visual roadmap of the child's journey, which can range from months to years. Children look forward to receiving their next bead. Not only is the Beads of Courage program meaningful for children, it's also therapeutic.

The program helps to decrease illness related distress, increase the use of positive coping strategies, helps children and families find meaning in illness, and restore a sense of self in those coping with serious illness. The program also provides something the child can use to tell about their experience during treatment and after.

For Catalina Mitchell, of Plains, Montana, the beads are especially meaningful. On June 2, 2017, her 7-year-old son, Jesse, was diagnosed with cancer. Having also experienced the passing of Jesse's father, this news was exponentially difficult. The Beads of Courage program helped focus Mitchell's perspective by actively reflecting on each step of Jesse's cancer journey.

"The beads give us hope. They don't bring back bad memories. If we didn't have the beads, no one would understand what he's gone through. Everybody that sees them … their heart drops," said Mitchell, "He thinks they're really cool. He's proud of himself … such a brave little boy."

In less than a year of treatment, Jesse has accumulated hundreds of beads. They fill four necklaces that proudly hand on the rear view mirror of Catalina's car, and the rest fills a wood-turned jar that a friend custom made to hold Jesse's beads.

The beads mean so much. They all represent something different. They show us his journey, everything he's gone through. They bring happiness to something that is horrible.

According to the American Cancer Society, an estimated 15,270 children in the U.S. under the age of 19 will be diagnosed with cancer this year. For those families a child's cancer diagnosis can be a significant stressor that affects the psychosocial well-being of family members through diagnosis, treatment, and survivorship and/or end of life. Understanding that cancer impacts the entire family is critical.

Participation in this program honors the courage that exists when children, their families, and communities face serious illnesses and reinforces the sharing of a very powerful voice using a visual narrative. Every single bead means something that child has endured during their treatment journey. Bringing an art-based intervention into the health care environment provides a way to promote their confidence and understand their own strength; it has an incredible impact on supporting wellness.

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GUIDELINES FOR BEADS OF COURAGE BOXES

Beads of Courage members may receive thousands of beads. It is desirable for your boxes to hold them all. As a result, turned or rectangular lidded boxes need to be large. Larger is better!

- ***Dimensions:***
  - Interior for turned boxes: 6” diameter (5” min.), 5” height (4” min.)
  - Interior for flatwork boxes: 4” x 6” x 4”

- ***Base and lids:***
  - Box bases should be wide enough so the box is stable and does not tip over easily.
  - Lids for Beads of Courage boxes should be easy for small or ill children to remove or lift. Remember that hospital rooms have limited storage space.

- ***Design Considerations***
  - Any finials should be easy for a small child to grasp and not too elaborate so they don't break.
  - Avoid excessively elaborate designs that may easily break or be damaged.

- ***Finishes***
  - Box surfaces must be securely sealed. Please take the time to ensure you are using a safe finishing process that does not contain toxic materials.
  - Boxes that have not been properly sealed can harbor mold which is dangerous to patients with compromised immune systems.
  - Do not use finishes like linseed oil that take a long time to outgas.
  - All kinds of wood are beautiful! Please refrain from painting Beads of Courage boxes. Instead, highlight the beauty of the wood with clear varnish, a stain, and/or burning.

BEADS OF COURAGE LOGO BEADS

Please include a Beads of Courage Logo Bead on your box! This bead can be attached anywhere within or outside the box. Designed specifically for your donation, each logo bead comes with a Woodworker Artist card that includes your personal signature. While these beads are not mandatory, they connect your art with the Beads of Courage mission and the patients love to know who made their beautiful gift!

You can order these beads at the Beads of Courage website:

https://store.beadsofcourage.org/beads-of-courage-logo-beads-for-woodturners.aspx