

Photo club captures keepsake images

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The Hardinman family in 2012. Julia is the baby, Olivia is the oncology patient, then 3. Father James, mother Erika Reboucas MIAMI DADE COLLEGE KENDALL CAMPUS PHOTO CLUB

The sun is shining, the breeze is soft and, in the corner of a prayer garden at Baptist Hospital, a small stone fountain gurgles soothingly. The setting is perfect for a keepsake photograph.

Two-year-old Julia Hardiman, a vision in white, thinks otherwise, however. She wriggles and writhes on her parents' lap as the family stares hard at a Canon camera sitting on a tripod a few yards away. At the very ripe age of 5, Olivia tolerates the shenanigans of her younger sister with the patience of a veteran. Her smile never wavers. She even makes sure that her purple gingham dress is displayed just so.

Finally, after much cajoling from the photographer, Julia grins, the shutter clicks and the image of one happy — and now relieved — family is frozen in time. For the Hardimans, this portrait is more than that. The picture is the latest installment to chronicle a long and arduous journey.

Olivia was diagnosed with leukemia in 2012, when she was 3. That fall the family posed for the first time in the same garden as part of a Miami Dade College photo club project. In that photo, Julia is a tiny baby and Olivia is, as her father James puts it, "bald as a spear."

"When you compare the photos," says his wife, Erika Reboucas, "you can see how far she's come. Now you can't even tell anything happened to her."

The Hardimans are part of the Kendall campus photo club's ongoing project to offer free portraits to pediatric oncology patients at Baptist. It was the idea of former photo club member Carlos Azpurua, who thought it would be a nice way to give back to the community. Associate senior professor and photo club advisor Tony Chirinos ran with it.

"It was a win-win," Chirinos says. "The students get experience, and the families get these free pictures that they can keep."

This is the fifth year the photo club set up shop at Baptist and, as always, it remained a crapshoot as to how many families would show up. Sometimes the children don't feel well enough to come. Other times they end up back in the hospital. And the youngest subjects aren't always cooperative.

"You have to work with that," Chirinos explains. "It's good for the students because they learn to deal with what could potentially be a difficult situation."

For the families, these 8-by-10 portraits are priceless. Laurie Sargent, senior child life specialist at Baptist Children's Hospital, sends an email invitation to her roster of patients every year. Patients vary in age from 2 to 20 years old, with equally diverse diagnoses, but all hold one trait in common: When they sit in the wrought iron bench in the tucked-away garden, they become part of "a keepsake that families have forever no matter what happens," she says.

Chirinos and his students usually don't know much about their subjects, and — unless they return the next year, as the Hardimans have done — they rarely find out what becomes of the sick children. But that's not the point of the annual exercise.

"We don't ask any questions," Chirinos says. "We just talk to them, engage them and try to get the best photograph we can under the circumstances."

Four photo club members have joined Chirinos on this November Saturday. The oldest — and the only mother — is Jeanette Albert, 32. "I can't imagine what these parents go through," she confides with a sigh.

But, she adds, the photos — actually, the whole experience of dressing up and posing — probably provides respite from what is surely a trying ordeal. “You hope that by doing this you’re bringing happiness to the family and some kind of hope, too.”

For the students, the lessons go beyond the basics of light and shadow, of proper composition. It’s an exercise in facing life at its most fragile.

“With cancer you just live day to day,” says Carolina Caruso, 22. “But with a photo you have the power to make a special moment last forever. It becomes tangible even after the moment has passed.”