

Swim Team, Community Helps Moraga Family

By Jennifer Wake

Difficult times often reveal the true nature of a community.



Luca, 3, and CJ, 5, take a break from the swim-a-thon for a quick hug with baby brother, Grayson
Photo by Jennifer Wake

Five months ago, Chris and Tanya Rago's son, Grayson, was born with extensive medical and physical difficulties and was given a clinical diagnosis of CHARGE syndrome – an extremely complex syndrome which occurs in about one in every 9-10,000 births worldwide.

Because of Grayson's extensive medical problems – including a congenital heart defect (requiring open heart surgery), abnormal inner ear structures, which cause Grayson to be completely deaf in his left ear and will likely affect his equilibrium, and with many additional anomalies – he will require lifelong care.

The Ragos received support from friends and family, and since Tanya has been a teacher at Camino Pablo Elementary School for several years, they hoped the teachers, district staff, and parents would be understanding.

They never expected this.

Facing uninsured medical expenses – including mounting co-pays, transportation fees, and numerous fees associated with Grayson's long hospital stays – and the need to care for their son during recoveries from his life threatening surgeries, the Ragos have seen an outpouring of support from coworkers, friends, and neighbors from Moraga and neighboring towns.

In addition to a flood of dinners, flowers, and well-wishes, on July 20 more than 130 swimmers took to the pool at Moraga Ranch, raising more than \$24,000 for Grayson at their annual swim-a-thon.

"It's so close to home; people just wanted to be able to do something," said Anne Robles, one of the swim-a-thon coordinators.

The Rago's older sons, CJ, age 5, and Luca, age 3, who belong to the Moraga Ranch swim team, also participated in the event. Luca, who is still learning to swim, used a kick board to finish his laps in the pool. "They were just so excited to be swimming for their brother, Grayson," Tanya said.

Hillary Thomas, 16, who has been a swimmer for Moraga Ranch since she was 2½, said this year's swim-a-thon was especially great. "All the little kids have seen Grayson here and really wanted to help," she said. "It was a team-oriented way to come together."

Moneys raised from the swim-a-thon will be put into a trust for Grayson to offset future medical bills, but support for Tanya and her family reached beyond the pool.

When Moraga Tennis and Swim Club coach Payam Saljoughian heard about the Moraga Ranch swim-a-thon, he and other members quickly organized a car wash held on July 30 at the Club to raise money for Grayson and the Ragos. Pastries and coffee were delivered on trays to people waiting in their cars as they lined to help during the three-hour-long event.

Additionally, Moraga School District Superintendent Rick Schafer said teachers and staff from Camino Pablo Elementary have donated their sick leave to Tanya so she can continue her coverage while she stays home with Grayson.

Tanya said the outpouring of support is overwhelming. "It's indescribable. You can't even thank people enough," she said. "I'm amazed by the community and how supportive they've been. I never imagined the community would be this supportive."

Schafer sees it differently. "We're supporting Tanya because we see ourselves as an extended family," Schafer said. "It's not a big deal because it's just what you do: You support family."

Grayson's father, Chris, said they never would have dreamed that the support would be like this.

"It's a roller coaster of ups and downs, but you do it. We've found strength we never even thought we had," he said. "I have to give my son what he needs to be the best he can be."

During the next month, Grayson will need to undergo another life-threatening surgery to fix a condition called laryngomalacia, where the soft, immature cartilage of the upper larynx begins to collapse inward during inhalation, causing airway obstruction. "We're trying to get surgery scheduled as soon as we can," Tanya said. "It just takes so long. We're waiting . . . waiting."

"You start to appreciate the simple things," Tanya added. "Grayson's here with us, which is huge."

Those interested in making a contribution to the trust for Grayson can send checks to Bank of America, c/o the Grayson Medical Fund, 1400 Moraga Way, Moraga, CA 94556.



Younger swimmers completed the swim-a-thon using kick boards
Photo by Jennifer Wake



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