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Volunteers needed to help brave 10-year-old battle against the odds

You hear a lot about bravery these days. Stories from the front lines of Iraq and Afghanistan speak of the courage of our soldiers in battle.

But you don't have to travel across the world to find an illustration of bravery. Here's one example I found right in the valley.

With every breath he takes, 10-year-old Brandon Rayner defines courage. He's the kind of young man that any soldier would be proud to serve with.

Brandon is a brain tumor survivor. As if that weren't enough of a challenge for a child in one lifetime, he also has leukemia and has been receiving treatment at Sunrise Children's Hospital. (If Brandon's name sounds familiar, it may be because he's among the first patients to ring in the new classroom for kids with cancer and blood diseases at Sunrise. Through a partnership with the Nevada



John L. Smith
COMMENTARY

Childhood Cancer Foundation and the Torino Foundation, Sunrise is adding an education component to the hospital's oncology unit for kids who must spend a lot of time there.)

Although Brandon is brave, this is a battle he can't fight alone. He needs a bone-marrow transplant.

He's receiving help from his friends, James and Tammy Richardson. James is the command sergeant

major of the 1/221 Cavalry and heads the Floyd Edsall Nevada Armory National Guard Training Center. Tammy works in the center's family services office. The Richardsons have secured space for Brandon's bone-marrow drive, which is scheduled from 1 to 8 p.m. today at the Armory, at 6400 Range Road.

As parents, the Richardsons met Brandon and his family while seeking treatment for their daughter, Stephanie, who was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Although Stephanie died in 2003 at age 16, her parents have continued to support charities such as the Nevada Childhood Cancer Foundation and Candlelighters for Childhood Cancer of Southern Nevada.

Richardson doesn't recall whether he and his wife made a conscious decision to support those organizations. He only knows that standing

by Stephanie during her fight changed them forever.

"We followed Brandon through his recovery process for quite some time," he says. "When they found out he had leukemia and would need a bone-marrow drive, Tammy and I said, 'Let's do it at the Armory.'"

Candlelighters is sponsoring Brandon's drive to find a bone-marrow donor. The process is quick and painless (a cotton cheek swab), and any healthy person from 18 to 60 can participate. Even easily frightened columnists can do it.

Brandon's army of supporters continues to grow.

"He's an incredible kid who has already fought off one obstacle," says Tami Belt of Blue Cube Marketing Solutions. "He deserves a fighting chance at surviving leukemia, too."

James and Tammy Richardson know from painful experience about

Brandon's bravery. But it's more than that.

"They're not the same type of children you would run across in the mall," Command Sgt. Maj. Richardson says.

"They're different spirits. They have a different type of soul. In our relationship with the kids we've met and dealt with, it seems to be the rule and not the exception. Our oncologist called it grace. That is the word, if there is a word for it. Those children have a grace about them that is elevated to the seriousness of their condition."

At Candlelighters, Angela Berg, patient advocate and director of programs and services, sees many brave children come through her door. Brandon's sunny disposition has amazed her.

"For most of us, we would want to crawl under a rock and curl up," Berg says. "This is just so overwhelming. But this little guy and this family have the strength that's

beyond what I've seen in my career. He couldn't have a more positive attitude. This young man is a textbook example that if a positive attitude is going to make an impact, he's going to show them how it's done."

For Brandon, the challenge of finding a marrow donor is complicated by the fact he's adopted. Parents Jo and Moe Rayner know that statistics rule out a match from their other children.

And so the search begins. Each potential marrow donor they register improves their odds.

"There's so much strength and support in this family unit that it's really heartwarming," Berg says. "This is huge, and very scary, but he has just not had a down day."

Won't you join Brandon's army?

John L. Smith's column appears Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday. E-mail him at Smith@reviewjournal.com or call (702) 383-0295.