

Article Last Updated: 2/12/2006 06:55 AM

## Helping others 1st choice

MARIAN GAIL BROWN [mgbrown@ctpost.com](mailto:mgbrown@ctpost.com)  
Connecticut Post

Lying in a hospital bed, groggy from the chemotherapy drugs with a television droning in the room, one thought kept running through Mikey Friedman's brain.

"If this cancer doesn't kill me, daytime television will," the 17-year-old Easton teen recalls thinking. "There's only so much Jerry Springer you can watch in a day with all of the people on it shouting, fighting and throwing things. Being in a hospital, especially when you have to lie there for hours and hours is incredibly boring."

With a regular chemotherapy regime lasting 8 to 10 hours at a clip, Friedman learned fast how tedious, tiring and sickening it is to be strapped to monitoring devices with intravenous drugs flowing into his body.

In the midst of one of these treatments, a letter arrived from the Make-A-Wish Foundation. It was a welcome distraction but Friedman initially declined. Thanks but no thanks. Sometimes, kids refuse. That's not unheard-of at the charity. Then he went a step further. He decided to leverage his wish to help other kids in hospitals around the country undergoing cancer treatment.

No Connecticut kid who has ever been offered a Make-A-Wish Foundation has ever given it away to somebody else. Until Mikey Friedman.

And nobody has ever taken money from the Make-A-Wish Foundation in Connecticut and used it as seed money to create a charity of his or her own.

Until Mikey Friedman.

Friedman's charity, Mikey's Way, is both cathartic and a distraction for its teenage mastermind, who has a rare form of stomach cancer known as a desmoplastic small round cell tumor that is hardly ever seen in someone so young. It grows quickly. Between the time Friedman's cancer was diagnosed, days after his 15th birthday, and his first surgery, his three tiny tumors had reached the size of a baseball. To this day, oncologists have not told him what his chances for recovery are.

"They've never seen anything like this in a kid. So, they really don't know and they don't want to make any predictions," Friedman says, running his fingers through his sparse brown hair which is just starting to grow back.

As often happens when a kid suddenly becomes seriously ill, the Make-A-Wish Foundation contacted Friedman. He got a call, then a letter. Then he got a call. And finally another letter.

"They offered to grant Mikey whatever he wanted," his mom, Barbara Friedman, says. "They made their offers a couple of times. And he kept telling them no, that he didn't want anything. He had this fear that if he accepted, then some other kid might never get their wish."

The way his mother tells it, it took a lot to convince Friedman that any wish granted to him would not deplete the charity's ability to help another kid.

The majority of Connecticut kids who receive Make-A-Wish gifts ask to go to Disney World in Florida, Disneyland in California or on a Disney cruise. The remainder ask to spend time with a celebrity or go on a shopping spree.

What Friedman is doing with his wish stunned the Make-A-Wish Foundation in Trumbull.

"He gave it back. Or rather, I should say, he's giving it back to other kids like him," Make-A-Wish Chief

Executive Officer Judy Campisi says. "That a child would take his wish and do something for others is unique and inspiring. He's the first kid in Connecticut to use his wish to help other kids."

Sometime between the operation to remove and protect some of his stem cells, and the super high-dose chemotherapy he received to fight the cancer, Friedman decided that what might help other kids while away the hours inside a hospital were handheld electronic games and iPods.

When he got out of Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City last fall, he headed to the Best Buy store in Danbury with \$11,000 — more than \$6,000 from the Make-A-Wish Foundation and the rest from family and friends — to buy the handheld electronics.

Right before Christmas and Hanukah, he and his family showed up at the Buffalo Children's Hospital in upstate New York.

"I think the kids there were really happy even if they didn't always show it," Friedman says. "Sometimes, you're just too tired from all of the chemo to have a reaction."

Since December, he has made plans to visit other hospitals around the country on a similar mission. The next one he intends to go is Denver Children's Hospital in Colorado.

He hopes the charitable foundation will carry on his work. His aunt, an attorney, is helping him organize the paperwork.

"My hope for what the foundation achieves is that it releases some of the boredom kids experience while they undergo cancer treatment," Friedman says. "That's even if it's only a momentary relief."

Had he had a second wish, Friedman thinks he might have asked to meet someone famous. But it wouldn't have been his baseball hero, Mike Piazza, or Billy Joel, Tom Petty or Blink 182, all of whom he listens to a lot on his iPod.

Instead, he says, he'd have welcomed the chance to meet physicist Brian Greene, famous for "string theory."

In fact, Friedman has one of Greene's books on his bedside stand. It sits on top of "The Illustrated Theory of Everything" by Stephen W. Hawking. Obviously, Mikey likes light reading.

What comes next is something rare for Mikey. He's at a loss for words. He shrugs and throws up his hands as if to say, "Got me. I have no idea," as he stands in his bedroom surrounded by impressive-looking awards and plaques marking sports and scholastic achievements, and for other community work he's done. What's harder to glimpse is what kind of future a brainy kid like Friedman wants for himself.

"I try not to think too much about that kind of stuff. I find it really important to live each day to its fullest," he says flopping onto his bed, "and if you think too much about the future it's a distraction."

But the subject comes around again a few minutes later all the same. "I really do like science and research, too," he says. "Now, though, I think I want to be a pediatric oncologist. I've always thought about being a doctor and I have three cousins who are doctors. "And I think that if I were a pediatric oncologist, for every kid I'd treat, I'd pretty much know what they were going through. I'd have empathy, not just sympathy, for them."