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Eight-year-old Sarah Harding of Rumson, who has Rett syndrome, a neurological disorder that affects mostly girls, smiles during the Dress Up 2 Cure Day, a fundraiser for Rett syndrome research at Deane Porter Elementary School in Rumson. (STAFF PHOTOS: TANYA BREEN)

Dressing up to find a cure

Special day raises money for Rett syndrome research

By JENNIFER BRADSHAW
KEYPORT BUREAU

RUMSON — In a second-grade class at Deane Porter Elementary School is a little girl named Sarah Harding.

The 8-year-old with blond hair and a toothy smile was dressed Wednesday in a colorful outfit that might make some mothers do a double-take and send their child back to their room to change into something a bit more subdued.

However, her mother, Ingrid Harding, was dressed in a similar outfit, complete with striped socks and temporary flower tattoos.

Sarah has Rett syndrome, a neurological disorder similar to autism that has removed her ability to speak or use her hands. It predominantly affects girls.

On April Fools Day, the students of Deane Porter school dressed in colorful and unique clothes for Dress Up 2 Cure Day, meant to raise funds for Rett syndrome research.

Other schools participating in the fundraiser included Forrestdale Middle School, Rumson Fair Haven High School, Holy Cross and Rumson Country Day schools, Sickles, Knollwood, and Meadowflower schools in Fair Haven, Tower Hill School in Red Bank and Nut Swamp School in Middletown.

Ingrid Harding is the voice behind the event, as well as behind a locally based organization that affects families nationwide and in the United Kingdom.

To improve the quality of her daughter's life, Harding in May 2006 started Girl Power 2 Cure, a nonprofit foundation dedicated to raising funds and spreading awareness of Rett syndrome.

"I always hated the term 'girl power,'" Harding said. "I thought it was empty and show-offy."

But while Sarah was enrolled in a



Ryan Dupree (from left), 8, and Anthony Blumel, 7, both of Rumson, along with special-education teacher Moira Barrett of Middletown and Sarah Harding dress "silly" during Dress Up 2 Cure Day. Below: Maxwell Baillie, 7, of Rumson contributes some loose change.

poor school district in Illinois, Harding said she saw Sarah's female classmates go out of their way to care for her. They sang to her, read to her, even wiped her nose when she needed it, Harding said.

"It empowered them. I could see their innate girl power. And it made Sarah's day," she said. "I thought there could be something to this (term) when it's actually used for something."

Harding, who has an abundance of cheer, said she chose dressing up because "girls love dressing up" and because the event encompasses the joy her family embraces to stay positive for Sarah.

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ON THE WEB: Visit our Web site, www.app.com, and search for "Rett syndrome" for a photo gallery.

Rett

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"We want to make the best life possible for Sarah," she said.

The name of the foundation is filled with small meanings, Harding said.

The flower displayed on the logo purposely has a slightly crooked petal.

"It shows that something isn't quite right, but it's still beautiful," Harding said.

In addition to running Girl Power 2 Cure and organizing events, Harding also is a co-founder and trustee of the Rett Syndrome Re-

search Trust, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to the development of treatment and cures for Rett.

Harding said she runs the foundation with the help of an Indiana mother, Kelly Butler, whose daughter Brooklyn has Rett syndrome.

All in all, her work encompasses about 60 hours a week. But she doesn't call it work.

"It's not work. I can't not do it," she said.

Recently, researchers have found a way to reverse Rett in laboratory mice, a breakthrough that gives Harding great hope that a cure for Sarah may be found in coming years.

However, research for Rett is underfunded, despite the fact that it is poised to be the first curable neurological disorder, she said.

If Rett is cracked, treatments and cures for other neurological disorders may soon follow, she said.

"Our girls suffer with symptoms of every neurological disorder for their entire lives, yet they could be the ones to help cure it all," Harding said.

For more information about Sarah and Ingrid Harding and Girl Power 2 Cure, visit www.GirlPower2Cure.org.

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