

Lives altered

Family chronicles response to diabetes diagnosis

BY KAITLIN MELANSON

Like any parent of a 7-year-old boy, Laura Plunkett of Marblehead was prepared for the occasional skinned knee or broken bone that might come with having an active child. A chronic life-threatening illness, however, was not part of the plan.

Yet, on the turn of a dime, her son Danny became a part of a growing number of youth to be diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes, formerly known as juvenile diabetes. The autoimmune disease, which accounts for 5 percent to 10 percent of diabetes cases, occurs when the body is unable to produce a sufficient amount of insulin due to the body's attack on the pancreas.

Five years have now passed since her son's original diagnosis, and Plunkett is hoping to spare parents in the same situation some of the initial shock she felt with the release of her new book, "The Challenge of Childhood Diabetes: Family Strategies for Raising a Healthy Child."

The book, which can currently be ordered on her Web site and should be stocked at the Spirit of 76 Bookstore by this weekend, looks into the first three years after Danny's diagnosis, showing step by step how the family regained control from chaos.

"We had been in the hospital learning about a disease, which none of us knew much about, and it was all very difficult to take in," Plunkett recalled. "They sit you down and basically say your kid could die, and there is the possibil-



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Five years after Danny Plunkett of Marblehead was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes, he strikes a victory stance as family members stand in support. From left are Laura Plunkett, Brian Plunkett, Danny Plunkett, Jesse Plunkett and Linda and Jack Weltner.

ity of seizures, and now you can take him home."

To come to grips with this life-altering situation, Plunkett set out to read anything and everything on the topic of juvenile diabetes.

"I was in a privileged position where I had the time and ability to gather all the information I needed and do all the research," Plunkett said. "Many parents don't have that privilege."

After purchasing as many books as she could find, Plunkett realized that each book had the same shortcoming.

"All the books I could find, especially the ones written by other mothers, talked about the diagnosis and then jumped right into how they are dealing with it," Plunkett said. "We began to think, 'What is wrong with us?' They seem so together, and here I am crying in the supermarket because I can't buy my son Goldfish and graham crackers."

In the midst of her search, Plunkett began compiling a personal journal of the day-to-day struggles she and her family were facing, aided by her mother, Linda Weltner, a former Boston Globe columnist.

"When things would get tough, my mother would tell me to come down and talk, and she would

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write," Plunkett said. "I had originally thought that it would just be something I could share with the kids years later as a reminder of what we had gone through, but then after going to talk to my mother every week, we ended up with 250 pages of everything we had talked about and I began to think maybe it could be something more."

It was then that the journals she had been creating transformed from a personal reminder to a survival guide for families in the same position.

"What our book has that is so different from any other is a day-to-day, month-to-month look at what we went through over the first few years after Danny's diagnosis," Plunkett said. "You see us struggle, and then you see us succeed. You see what it was like for us going through our first Halloween after the diagnosis and then you see how things changed by the second."

Another unique feature is that the book provides a variety of perspectives, relaying the voices and opinions of not just Plunkett herself, but also the voices of her parents, husband, daughter and, of course, Danny himself.

"The book includes not only my reflections on the situation, but also the kids, my husband, and my parents," Plunkett said. "You get to see what it was like as a grandparent taking your grandchild for the first time and how they overcame

the fear a making a mistake."

When Weltner first had Danny for a visit after he had been diagnosed, she said one of the hardest parts was breaking old habits.

"We found ourselves falling into old habits like sitting around playing a game instead of going out and getting exercise," Weltner said.

In the book, Weltner shares one of her scariest moments, which occurred when she tried to take her grandson on a day trip to the Museum of Science. While on their way to the museum Weltner experienced some car trouble, leaving her and the children stranded. Misinterpreting a low point in Danny's blood-sugar levels as mere disappointment, Weltner says she panicked and had trouble figuring out what he needed.

Though Danny's sister, Jessie, got them through the situation, Weltner experienced first hand the difficulty her daughter was facing every day.

"Some grandparents faced with these situations would be tempted to turn around and decide to just start visiting him at his house only," Weltner said. "It is tempting to think of what will be more comfortable for me, but I realized my daughter really needed my support."

What made the situation even easier for Weltner was her daughter's encouraging reactions to everything.

"Instead of being critical of my mistakes, she acted as a coach, always teaching and encouraging," Weltner said. "She would see it as

her own mistake and say she should have gone over the steps more with me, rather than blame me for what had happened."

In addition to the day-to-day rundown of how the family dealt with different situations, the book also focuses on how they arrived at a proper diet to not only help keep Danny's diabetes under control, but to improve the health of the other members of the family.

"Most of the books I had read focused on the disease, whereas I wanted to focus on the health of my child as a whole," Plunkett said. "We all completely changed our diet to a whole-food diet, which none of the books had talked about, and quickly began to notice that there was a definite change in Danny's [blood-sugar] levels if we gave him a grilled-cheese sandwich on sprout bread instead of white."

The end of the book, which is designated as the parent's survival guide, provides sample food logs, showing how the family altered their diets over the first three years, including a list of cookbooks offering recipes that fit with a whole-food diet.

"Though I made this book with parents of children with both Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes in mind, I have been told by some who have read it that it is a book for any parent who wants their kid to eat healthy," Plunkett said.

For more information on the book or to purchase your own copy, visit www.challengeofdiabetes.com.