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Meet the
Collett Family



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By Katie Wray
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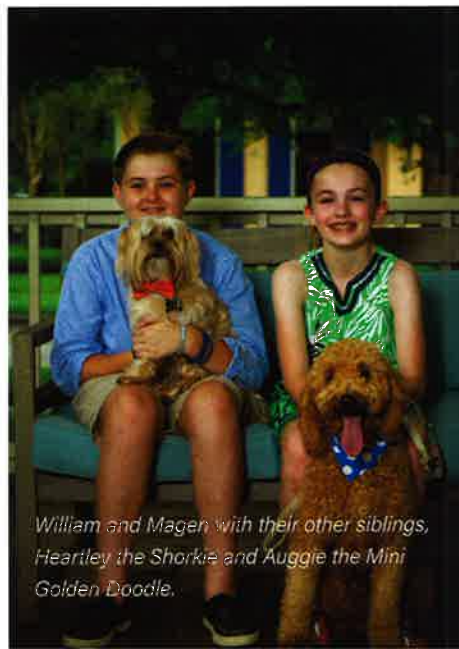
On a day in May 2017 that started like any other, Tom and Ann Collett found themselves in a hospital hallway late into the night. Earlier that weekend, their son, William, had mentioned his head hurting. The pain persisted; so, they decided to see their family pediatrician who sent them immediately to UF Health Shands Children's Hospital. There, the Collett family quickly learned that William had childhood acute lymphoblastic leukemia.

"The night he was diagnosed we stood in the hallway and said we fully believe that God is going to heal William completely, and that's how we moved forward," Ann shared, still with her unwavering tone of confidence.

"Cancer is not something you anticipate happening to your family, especially to one of your children. There simply aren't

words to describe hearing that your son has cancer," says Tom. "But there is much to say about our experience over the last three and half years. We are abundantly blessed in so many ways and have been sustained by our faith, family and friends. We are so thankful to live in this community with so many wonderful and caring people."

Tom, Ann and their daughter, Magen, fight cancer with William holding the belief that you make a choice on how you live; you can focus on the blessings or on the negatives. Both exist, but they chose to focus on the things that would fill their hearts with the strength needed to fight the battle in which they found themselves.



William and Magen with their other siblings, Heartley the Shorkie and Auggie the Mini Golden Doodle.

Tom and Ann Collett with their great friends, Mike and Tonya Walsh.



"It's so easy to wallow and focus on the negative, and believe me, there are a lot of negatives with cancer, but there were, and continue to be, so many people praying for us," Ann said. "We have such support in every conceivable way."

If there are people who know every up and down of the journey, it would be Mike and Tonya Walsh. With their son, Ethan, who is William's best friend, they moved into the Collett's neighborhood in Town of Tioga the same week that they came home from the hospital after the diagnosis. "It was certainly divine intervention," Ann said. The day that William went to the doctor, Tonya Walsh was the first person Ann called. Tonya didn't hesitate to have Magen over and prepare the first of many dinners for the Colletts.

Queen of Peace Catholic Academy, where William and Magen attend school, showed the Collett family that they were not alone. They designed shirts, and Ann shared that she would never forget the day that she



walked into the church to find more than 400 students and staff sporting their shirts in support of her son and pediatric cancer awareness.

The Colletts also had bracelets made with "Mark 11:22-24" and "Pray for William" engraved on the outside. The inside of each bracelet reads "Have Faith in God" as a reminder of that specific scripture which reads, "And Jesus answered saying to them, 'Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him. Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you."

"I would go into stores and see people wearing the bracelets. In many cases, I would not even know these folks, but they would come up to me and tell me that they are praying for my son!" Ann shared. The thoughtfulness and prayerfulness of others does not go unnoticed by the Colletts. Through social media, the list of people praying for William's cure covered numerous countries and time zones. "There was, and continues to be, an absolute embracing of our needs--and people do it in such a

grace-filled and caring way that lifts us up spiritually and emotionally; we have no words. We are constantly humbled by all of the people praying for us," Ann said.

William himself is an extraordinarily positive and optimistic person, greatly due to the amazing role models he has as parents. His response to the cancer is that it will never define him. He asked his parents if they could refrain from telling the coach about his cancer when he tried out for the Queen of Peace Catholic Academy basketball team. He did not want special privileges and knew that he could do it on his own. William also runs cross country and throws the shot put for the academy's track and field team, sometimes playing in games or running in races just days after a spinal tap or chemotherapy infusion.

One of William's greatest cheerleaders and source of support is his sister, Magen. The two siblings have always been very close. Magen is a natural caretaker, and Ann and Tom know they can count on her to help take good care of William. She has a gift of baking and will often bake something special for her brother. "She has been on her own journey. It's a lot to comprehend for adults, let alone children," Ann said. Still, Magen continuously makes her parents

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smile in how she responds; even in the little things, like watching her brother's favorite shows with him.

One of those shows is Shark Tank. William envisions being an entrepreneur when he grows up. Magen has an entrepreneurial spirit of her own. She loves watching cooking and baking shows, then concocting new ideas in the kitchen; she even has her own mixer and supplies. Cupcakes and French macaroons are a couple of her specialties.



William and Ethan on the day William returned to school after being out for several months.



"We always tell them to follow their dream, and that if it's something about which you're passionate it won't feel like a job," Ann and Tom shared.

Ann is the President of Headlight Data, a software company that serves the economic and workforce development industries, based in Austin, Texas. Prior to that, she served for a decade as a Vice President of the Gainesville Area Chamber of Commerce. Ann originally came to Gainesville in 2000 to run the North Florida operations for ALLTEL Communications. She was born and raised in Scranton, Pennsylvania prior to becoming a Floridian.

Tom is widely known in the community for his work with Gator sports, as a play-by-play announcer for the University of Florida Women's Volleyball, and as the Exactech Arena announcer for Gator Men's Basketball and Gymnastics. He's owned TDC Entertainment for more than thirty years, providing entertainment and emcee services for weddings and large scale corporate, sporting and non-profit events. He is also the Sales Manager at Electronics World. At eight years old, Tom moved to Gainesville with his family, when his father started as one of the founding dentists and professors at the UF Dental School.

The Colletts have been maintaining life as normal as possible through William's daily and monthly chemotherapy treatments and doctor's visits. While the last few years of life have had an unexpected turn of events for their family, they know they are stronger for it. "He's going to ring the bell on September 14th and after 40 months of chemotherapy, we're ready," Ann and Tom exclaimed.

This month, we join the Collett family in increasing awareness of Pediatric Cancer. The Colletts explained that one of the greatest challenges in Pediatric Cancer is that it is underfunded in terms of research. And, of course, more funding leads to more cures. "It is said that childhood cancer is rare. It's anything but rare; right here in your community, there are people facing this," Ann shared. She and her family have supported other families on similar journeys, knowing that navigating cancer's battle is not for the faint of heart.

"We could not have done it without great hope, faith, love and community," Tom shared. The Colletts now devote themselves in many ways to making sure other children claim victory over their cancer diagnoses.



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