

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CALLA KESSLER



Emma colors in Hello Kitty at the Kids Cancer Foundation in Royal Palm Beach on Oct. 24. She was diagnosed with leukemia in May.

Ailing girl finds solace in unicorns as mom struggles to support family



Ashley Lapaglia injects chemotherapy into daughter Emma's leg at their home in West Palm Beach on Nov. 9.

By Leslie Gray Streeter
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

"You like unicorns, right?" Young Emma Lapaglia laughs at her mother Ashley Lapaglia's question. Like them? She's practically swimming in them — there are two brightly colored ones on her lap.

"This one's new. They just met," she says.

And they're all over the pink-and-blue blanket spread over her little legs and fuzzy slippers, dancing underneath the tube that flows lifesaving chemotherapy drugs into her arm.

Ashley and Emma come to Palms West Hospital from West Palm Beach twice a week, and sit here all day among the unicorns to treat Emma's pre-B cell acute lymphocytic leukemia, a type of blood cancer. Emma was diagnosed in May. Because the 7-year-old girl is, by nature, a smiley, laughing child who loves doing crafts and drawing, Ashley says she knew something was very wrong earlier this year when suddenly "she was extremely lethargic. She had a fever that wouldn't go away."

Doctors initially said the girl was anemic and put her on iron supplements. "But I just knew. She usually comes in like the sunshine. This was not my kid," Ashley says. Her mother's intuition turned out to be spot-on.

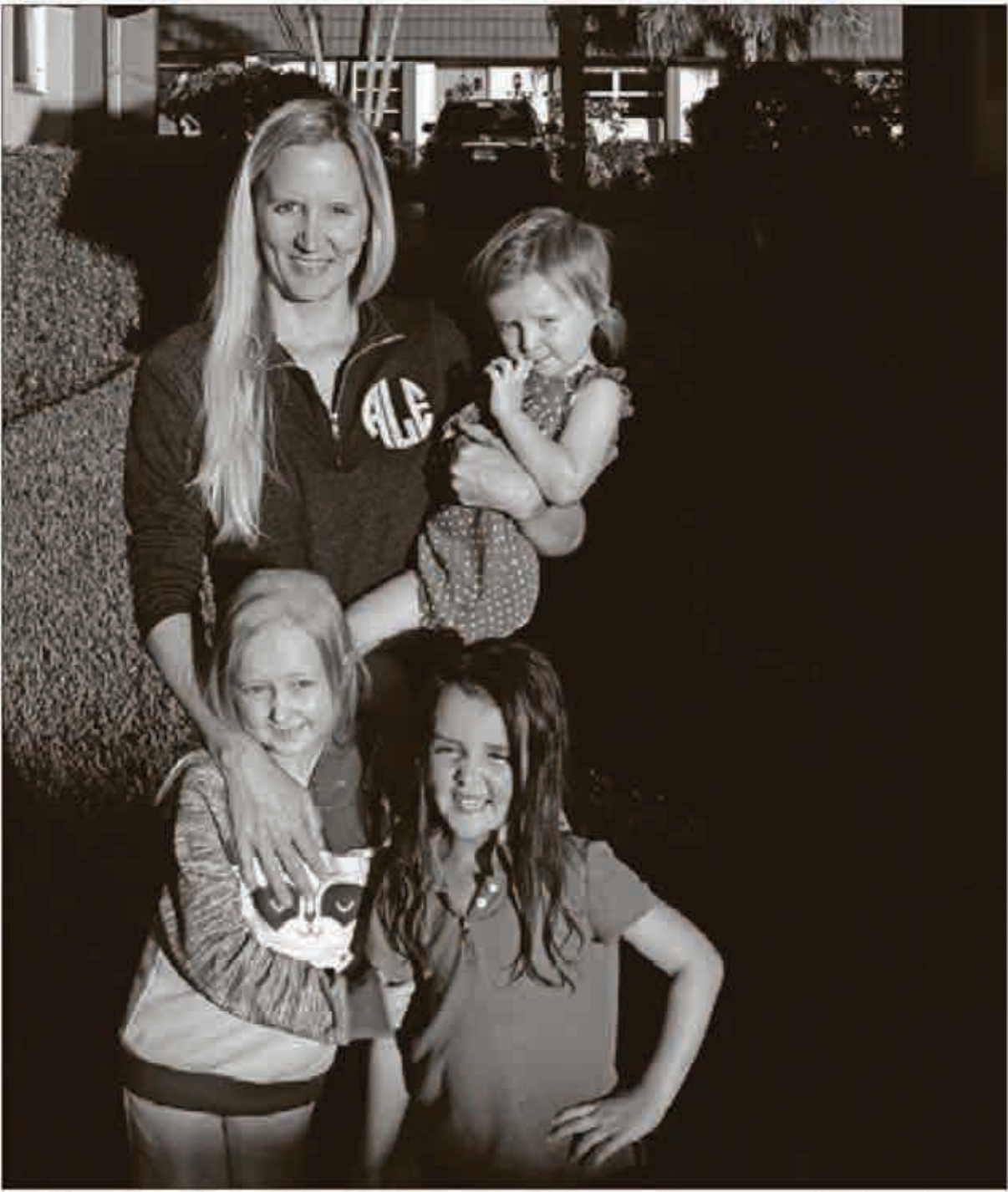
There is never a good time to be told your baby has cancer, and the timing here was utterly devastating. Ashley and her husband separated earlier this year. He moved out of state and does not supply regular support. After years of being a full-time mother

EMMA'S WISH: Emma Lapaglia is a 7-year-old girl who was diagnosed earlier this year with pre-B cell acute lymphocytic leukemia. This devastating diagnosis comes in the midst of her parents' separation and her mother, Ashley, must help her daughter fight for her life as she struggles to provide stability and security for Emma and her younger sisters, Piper and Dylan. Ashley is now the family's sole provider, and her family is in deep financial need. Temporarily living with relatives after Emma's father left the family, they must move into a new home. They need money to cover first and last month's rent plus a security deposit, as well as utilities, phone and even food. Emma's mother would also like to be able to provide gifts for her girls to at least shine some light on this most bleak of years.

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to Emma and her sisters Piper, 5, and Dylan, 2, Ashley was now going to be the primary breadwinner and was about to go back to nursing school to provide for her family.

But Emma's illness obliterated those plans. They had to move out of their home and are living temporarily with Ashley's father. Ashley's full-time job became Emma's caretaker, sitting anxiously by her side during her treatments and negotiating the tense, frightening realities of a sick child. The girl is in remission but there have been setbacks, like the pain-



Ashley Lapaglia and her daughters Emma, 7, Piper, 5 and Dylan, 2.

ful mouth sores she developed during the chemotherapy.

"She cried," Emma's grandmother, Marilyn Salisbury, says. "We cried."

"My family has helped. But I can't help," says Emma's mother, frustrated. Her full-time job is here, but that won't pay the rent, let alone first and last month's rent plus security deposit, which is required now that the family must move. Then there are utilities and food, plus gifts that

might lift the kids' spirits during this bleak and confusing period.

"Yes, it's a super-fun time," Ashley says, wryly. She jokes, but the reality is that the emotional and financial weight is on her. And it's overwhelmingly heavy.

Emma hopes to return to school next year. But it's going to be a long road to truly super-fun, or even secure, times for this family.

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