

Support overwhelming for mom of sick 11-year-old Collier Gray

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An outpouring of support from both locals and social media is helping Jennifer Stephens cope with health issues that have besieged her son Collier.

Collier Gray, an 11-year-old boy who'd never been anything but healthy — a typical elementary school student — suffered a brain aneurysm rupture on Feb. 25.

“It was a snow day and he was playing Xbox with a neighbor,” said Stephens. “He said he had a headache and then started screaming and was in so much pain.”

Collier was taken to Floyd Medical Center where a neurosurgeon removed a hematoma the size of a lemon from his brain.

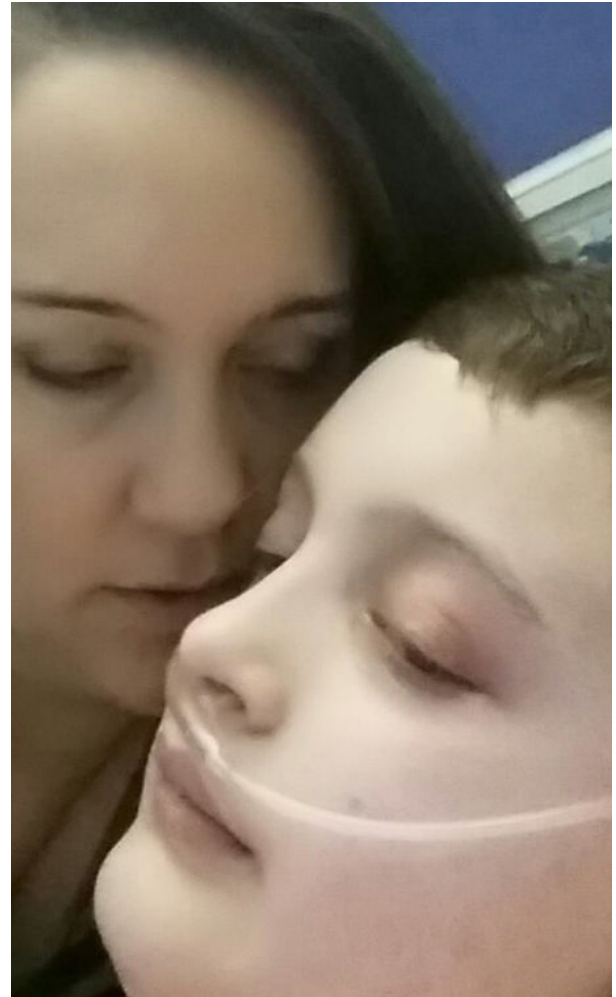
“His last words to me were ‘Mama, I’m going to die,’” Stephens said. “The doctors were telling me this was very bad and they usually didn’t see this kind of thing in an 11-year-old.”

Collier was stabilized after his surgery and when the roads were clear enough, he was taken to Scottish Rite in Atlanta, where he spent three weeks in the pediatric intensive care unit.

“He was sent to rehab,” Stephens said. “He started showing progress then. It was small steps, but it felt like a lot.”

Collier was able to communicate by blinking his eyes, she said.

He was also able to swallow, which was a huge step in the eyes of the hospital staff.



Collier Gray

Collier Gray and his mother, Jennifer Stephens, in a photo taken July 1.
(Contributed photo)

On May 27, Collier was able to come home but after only a few days on June 1, he had to go back to the hospital, Stephens said.

Collier's eyes remained closed for two days while he was awake. While doctors said this sometimes happened because of changes and adjustments after the surgery and treatment and rehab, it was still a concern.

Collier's eyes continued to remain closed for five days and his heart rate would go down and then up. They returned to the hospital and the right side of his body began to swell. Doctors began searching for what was causing the problems, Stephens said.

Collier developed pneumonia and was given a breathing mask. Doctors and nurses continued to run tests and adjust his medication.

After a month back at Scottish Rite, Collier is showing some progress, she said.

"He is able to respond more and he played a game we made up with me," Stephens said. "He has an envelope of jokes on his door that the nurses and doctors tell him. He loves 'Yo Mama' jokes."

A Facebook page, We Love Collier Gray, was started to support Collier and his family.

Before he became sick, Collier was a student at East Central Elementary School.

The school has held multiple fundraisers for him recently to help with medical costs, Stephens said. Other schools in Rome City also came together to help and people who don't even know Collier or his family are trying to aid in any way they can.

Schools in Polk County, where Collier's father, Chandler Gray, teaches, have also been holding fundraisers. Stephens, who taught for Rome City Schools, has left her job to take care of Collier.

"I'm a type A person, I've always been a multi-tasker," she said. "It was hard for me at first to realize I needed help. Someone has to help me do everything now. I won't leave Collier because he needs me to be there."

The support through the Facebook page and the community has overwhelmed her, she added.

"There's been so much support, really I never expected this," Stephens said. "An older lady from New Jersey just fell in love with Collier and began to work to find ways to help us. She helped us find grant money to do some work on my house so Collier's wheelchair would fit inside. Now, she's working on helping us find money for a van so we can transport Collier to his appointments."

People from other countries are even sending money to help, Stephens said.

“A man sent \$1,500 by Paypal and told me that in his country they just try to help others that need it,” she said. “I never expected that. I’ve had so many people reach out to help Collier.”
(Donate via Paypal with email address welovecolliergray@gmail.com.)

Stephens said that right now there is no such thing as a normal day for her and she is holding on to the hope that Collier will get better and return to the talkative, active boy he was.

“I just want to hear him say mama again,” she said.