

# It started with Matthew

Cooper clan has been inspired to help sick children and their families

By Heather Shelton  
The Times-Standard

EUREKA — Since their son, Matthew, was diagnosed with a brain tumor in July 1996, Dan and Wendy Cooper of Fortuna have traveled 90,000 miles via airplane and automobile to get the 8-year-old to his lifesaving treatments.

"We're very fortunate to have been able to do it," Wendy said. "We did have a lot of community support, spent hours on the Internet looking for the best fares and we used organizations such as the Corporate Angel Network. Everything we could do, we used."

Still, the Coopers wondered how others coped under similar circumstances.

"As we kept doing this," Wendy said, "we kept thinking, 'How do other families do it who aren't as fortunate and don't have the time?'"

The Coopers came up with an idea to start a nonprofit organization — called the Oomiak Foundation — to provide financial support for families who must seek medical treatment for their children outside of Humboldt County.

"We want it to help with any medical problems a child has ... If a doctor feels a child needs to be seen somewhere else, Oomiak can help quickly and easily," said Wendy, who added that her own family does not benefit financially from the endeavor.

"The purpose of it," David said, "is for other families."

Still, inspiration for Oomiak comes from their experiences with their son. In July 1996, when Matthew was 3, he went to see a doctor about a vision problem. He was referred to UC San Francisco Medical Center. There, an MRI showed a brain tumor. Matthew had surgery that August. Because of the location of the growth, surgeons were only able to remove part of the tumor.

For the next few years, Matthew and his mom traveled regularly to San Francisco and Sacramento for his chemotherapy and other treatments. In time, doctors decided the boy needed another kind of chemotherapy, available only through clinical study.

"He didn't fit any of the protocol in California," Wendy said. "At that point, we contacted Dr. Henry Friedman at Duke Medical Center. He said, 'He'll fit in my study,

get here in a week and we'll start the chemotherapy.'"

To stay in the clinical study, Matthew and one or both of his parents — and sometimes 4-year-old sister Elizabeth — traveled every 28 days to Durham, N.C., from June 1999 to June 2000. Now they make the trip every two to three months.

"There are all the issues (involved with this): parking, gas, the cost of a baby-sitter for other siblings that have to stay home, lost wages if they're self-employed," said Wendy, who, with her husband, began to think about starting the foundation during the long flights to North Carolina.

It was at Duke Medical Center the Coopers first met internationally renowned composer David Friedman. His songs have been recorded by Diana Ross, Barry Manilow, Kathie Lee Gifford and others. Friedman worked as conductor and vocal arranger for Disney films like "Beauty and the Beast," "Aladdin," "Pocahontas" and "The Hunchback of Notre Dame." He is also an active fund-raiser for Duke Medical Center's children's hospital.

"We were sitting around a table visiting one day," Wendy said, "and he started telling us about his show, 'King Island Christmas.' He said, '...Why don't you do it as initial fund-raising for the foundation you've been talking about?'"

This past June, the Coopers met with represen-

Matthew Cooper, 8, loves to fly and enjoys making air-planes like this one.



tatives from the Humboldt Light Opera Company to see if the community theater group would be willing to do the production.

"We took a video about 'King Island' and a CD and asked them please to do it," Wendy said. "The next day, the directors from Humboldt Light Opera Company voted unanimously to do it. We were so excited ... We can't say thank-you enough for the people who've put in hours of time in this."

Humboldt Light Opera Company, which usually performs Handel's "Messiah" during the holiday season, opted this year instead to present "King Island Christmas," with proceeds going to the Oomiak Foundation.

"The company had to make a choice between 'King Island' and 'Messiah,' which is a community tradition, as well as money maker for HLOC," said Tracey Barnes Priestley, a board member for both Humboldt Light Opera and Oomiak

Foundation. "The company said contributing towards this cause was greater than making money (from) Messiah."

Based on the inspiring book by author Jean Rogers, the musical "King Island Christmas" is the true story of 150 Alaskan villagers who refused to accept that stormy seas could prevent the ship carrying their priest from reaching their island. The villagers joined together to carry a traditional walrus skin boat — called an oomiak — over a steep, icy mountain, to the lee where they could row out and gather up their priest and small gifts for the children.

It was from this tale that Wendy and Dan Cooper came up with the name for their new foundation.

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This quilt by Laura Fogg of Ukiah depicts the "King Island Christmas" story. It will be given away on



# OOMIAK: Life and hope to critically ill children

FROM C1

"We'd gone through a zillion names, and none of them fit," Wendy said. "Then Dan turned around and said, 'the Oomiak Foundation.' In the story, it's the oomiak boats that allow the people to bring life and hope to their island. It fit. We hope the Oomiak Foundation will do that for the families: bring life and hope if their children are critically ill."

"King Island Christmas" opens Dec. 1 at the College of the Redwoods Forum Theater with a gala reception, which will be attended by David Friedman and "King Island" librettist Deborah B. Brevoort. The performance is sold out.

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— **Wendy Cooper**

Matthew's mom

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tions we ever had for our first fund-raiser," Wendy said.

Tickets are available to all remaining performances, scheduled at 7:30 p.m. Dec. 2, 8 and 9 and at 2 p.m. Dec. 10. Tickets are \$10 for adults, \$8 for students/seniors, and \$5 for children under. For ticket information call 445-4310.

"King Island" CDs and note-cards will be on sale at performances as well, with a percentage of proceeds going to the Oomiak Foundation. A quilt made by Laura Fogg of Ukiah will also be given away in a benefit drawing. The quilt will be on display during the day at the Humboldt Artisans Crafts and Music

Festival, Dec. 1 to 3, at Redwood Acres Fairgrounds and in the evenings at the CR Forum Theater on performance nights. Quilt tickets are \$1 each or six for \$5. The drawing will be held after the Dec. 10 performance.

The Coopers are overwhelmed by the outpouring of support for the Oomiak Foundation.

"The response and the turnout and the money that people are willing to donate," David said, "it's been incredible."

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For more information on the Oomiak Foundation or about how you can make a donation, write to Oomiak Foundation, 233 K St., Eureka, 95501, or call 443-8011.