



Katie’s Roar Sponsors a Room at the Ronald McDonald House and Gives a Merry Christmas to Families Staying There this Holiday Season



By **JEN MILLER**
Staff Writer

Hawley resident and mother of three, Lisa Bjorndahl, came right out and said while it’s natural for a child to bury a parent someday, it is unnatural for a parent to bury a child. It is a lingering grief that never heals, but Lisa’s husband, Aaron, said it best when he said, “Katie’s Roar gives us somewhere to put our thoughts, feelings, and energy because if you let it, grief will consume you.” This year, and for years to come, the Katie’s Roar Foundation will put its energy into the Ronald McDonald House Charities of the Red River Valley (RMHC).

Katie Bjorndahl, daughter of Aaron and Lisa, was born and raised in Hawley. Her favorite place in Nugget Territory was the softball field from the moment she picked up her first ball at about the age of three. Her passion for softball grew, and by seventh grade, she had joined the Nugget varsity softball team. She played infield and then took the pitcher’s mound her senior year and went on to pitch for her college team, the Wahpeton Wildcats. During her second year of pitching, the team went to the nationals for the first time in the college’s history and placed third.

Katie met and made many friends along the way, likely because of her warm and outgoing personality. “She was always smiling and laughing. I don’t think she knew the impact she made on people. We didn’t know the impact she made on people until after she passed. Over nine hundred people showed up between the two funeral services,” Lisa Bjorndahl commented.

On September 25, 2018, Katie was found unconscious in her apartment. She was immediately rushed to the hospital and admitted to the ICU. Friends and family were shocked to learn untreated mental health issues were the cause. “It was such a shock to everybody. She could mask so well,” Lisa shared. “Looking back, signs of mental health issues may have always been there, but it definitely took a dip after losing her best friend in a house fire and later her grandma (Bushka), who she was very close to. Hindsight is always 20/20, and as her parents, we wanted the whys and ifs, but she never reached out. We were a very close family—the tribe of five, we called ourselves, and we always made time for Sunday suppers. She knew she could come to us, but she’d rather help someone else than ask for help.”

On September 29, 2018, Katie passed away, but five years later her memory continues to thrive. “We decided right then and there at the hospital that her death wouldn’t be in vain. We would find ways to carry on, knowing that even if we helped one person, we’ll have made a difference,” Lisa said.

Through Katie’s passing, her family and friends founded Katie’s Roar Foundation, an impactful way to keep her memory alive while promoting mental health awareness and seeing individuals and families through difficult times. The nonprofit organization provides a Katie Bjorndahl Memorial Scholarship to a graduating Hawley senior, a mental health speaking platform, and last year, raised money to ensure children received a warm meal.

This year, Katie’s Roar Foundation found another way to help families who’ve fallen upon difficult times and, with your help, put gifts under the Christmas tree this holiday season. While the Katie’s Roar Foundation knew they would do something wonderful in honor of her anniversary, and this year they were able to fulfill their dream of sponsor a room at the RMHC through a large donation from which came as a complete and wonderful



The Bjorndahl family sponsors a room at the RMHC in honor of their daughter Katie.

surprise.

Katie’s parents and family were going to meet Katie’s old college teammates and coach one afternoon, but they weren’t expecting the surprise they walked into that afternoon. “Katie’s friend Hailey Thompson tricked us into swinging by First Interstate Bank to see where she worked. When we arrived, probably twenty people were there, her college softball coach and teammates were standing there. Plus a bank employee had flown in from the Billings, Montana bank branch to present what turned out to be a \$25,000 check to the Katie’s Roar Foundation,” Lisa explained.

First Interstate Bank founded First Interstate BancSystem Foundation, which is driven by a vested interest in the health and strength of its communities, working to make them better places to live, work, and raise families. According to their website, the foundation “collectively awarded \$9.1 million in support across its fourteen-state footprint. With a focus to strengthen our communities, 55% of these dollars focused on poverty and were awarded to nonprofits actively assisting low and moderate-income individuals and communities.”

It turned out that Hailey had applied for a First Interstate BancSystem Foundation grant. “I was told by Hailey and bank members that out of the five hundred nominations, Katie’s Roar Foundation was the easiest to pick of the forty foundations that would receive \$25,000 throughout the banking area,” Lisa shared. “We had no clue it was coming, but upon receiving it, we knew what we wanted to do with the donation. It has always been a huge dream of ours to be involved with the RMHC by sponsoring a room in Katie’s memory.”

The Ronald McDonald House Charities provides the comforts of home for nearly eight hundred families a year while their child receives medical treatment or mental health services. Its mission is “keeping families together and providing the comforts of home while their child receives medical care.” The charity accomplishes its mission by keeping families at the forefront of every decision made, positively impacting families by providing personalized support and comfort, engaging the community through nurturing our donor and volunteer partnerships and adapting to the ever-changing medical environment and needs of the families they serve.

Lisa immediately contacted the RMHC and told them about the Katie’s Roar Foundation and its recent donation, which they wanted to go toward the charity. “The woman on the phone went silent, and then I could hear crying on the other end. When I asked what was wrong, she started talking about how things have a strange way of always working out. If you’re a religious person, you tend to find that things happen for a reason. I soon learned that it cost exactly \$25,000 to sponsor a room. After hearing about Katie’s story, she invited us to tour the house and see everything it offers to families.



Ronald McDonald House Charities of the Red River Valley (RMHC).

It was a very emotional experience. I kept thinking it was something we could’ve used while Katie was in the hospital, a place to shower and have a meal,” Lisa explained.

On September 29, Katie’s family, friends, and Katie’s Roar Foundation board members dedicated Room 303 at the RMHC, 4757 Agassiz Xing S, Fargo, as Katie’s Roar in Memory of Katelyn Bjorndahl, by doing a live butterfly release. “I could feel Katie’s presence through the whole experience. I know that this is something she’d be excited to be a part of. She was a very giving person and loved working with kids,” Lisa shared.

The RMHC is set up like a hotel. Each room has two beds, a private bathroom, and a seating area. In many cases, families arrive with little to nothing, which isn’t a problem because the RMHC covers the necessities. It provides onsite laundry, travel to and from the hospital, a play room, full kitchen, and even fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies. “When you have a child staying at the hospital, things like buying meals, vending machines, and all the extras really start to add up. The RMHC provides home-cooked meals and even a space to have your own items and store groceries to cook your meals,” Katie’s Roar Foundation board member Karen Kasin commented. “It is really an amazing place that I would encourage people to tour.”

“One of the biggest things, which is pretty new and ties in that mental health piece for us, is that families of Prairie St. Johns’ patients can now stay there,” Lisa added.

The RMHC and the families staying there have become a part of the Bjorndahl home. The family has made a home-cooked meal, and will again during Christmas Eve and New Years Eve, for the families staying there. Many of their friends and family have donated diapers, baby clothes, and toiletries to the house.

It is never easy for families to land in the RMH while their child or sibling is in the hospital. It’s even harder during the holidays. While Katie’s Roar Foundation can’t ease their pain, they can eliminate some of the burden by providing Christmas for these families. The RMHC puts up a tree and decorates for the holidays. Donors like the Katie’s Roar Foundation come in and can donate toys collected and will make a Christmas meal, but they could use a little help putting gifts under the tree.

The Katie’s Roar Foundation is hosting a Christmas Toy Drive and is asking for the community’s help to provide Christmas for the twenty to thirty families who will spend the holidays at the RMHC. Now until December 20, people can drop off new, non-wrapped gifts like small gift cards, water bottles, wireless headphones, gifts for teens are especially needed, and toys. People can drop gifts off at Kirk’s Gas Station, Tony’s SuperValu, Rapat, and Eye Care Associates and Farmers Insurance in Fargo, as well as many local churches by Wednesday, December 20. People can also make a monetary donation



through the QR Code set up at each location and the foundation will do the shopping to buy gifts.

“The goal is to ensure every child receives something,” Lisa stated. “We will set up any extra gifts for parents staying at the house to shop since they don’t have time to shop in that situation. No matter your situation, everyone deserves Christmas, and this is one way we can take the burden off of them.”

In the future, Katie’s Roar Foundation would like to add a teen room to accompany the little kids’ playroom. “We’d love to create a separate teen room full of fun things like play stations and all things teens like, movies, popcorn machine, etc., so teens have something to do while their sibling is in the hospital. It’s hard to imagine how they feel, and it would just be wonderful to provide them their own private space during that time,” Lisa commented.

The Katie’s Roar Foundation encourages folks to visit www.katiesroar.com to learn more about the RMHC and even line up a tour. “We were overwhelmed when we toured the RMHC and learned what they provide. Until we took that tour, we never had an inkling,” Lisa commented. Folks can also purchase Katie Roar merchandise through the website. The

money raised through those sales will continue to stock the RMHC with necessities for future families and other donations made through Katie’s Roar.

The holidays are so merry and bright because of the “strong and courageous” people who go out of

their way to make them so even when their own world is missing some of its shine. Families at the RMHC could use some of that Christmas spirit more than ever, whether it is a gift, or a prayer.

Katie's Roar

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