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Janet Decker: A hero in two communities

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Chris Howell | Herald-Times

Janet and Ryan Decker at Bryan Park in Bloomington, Ind., Friday, Oct. 11, 2013.

Posted: Tuesday, November 5, 2013 11:15 am | Updated: 4:28 pm, Tue Nov 5, 2013.

By A. Jay Wagner Special to The H-T | 0 comments

Ryan Decker, 2 years old, raced about, slowing down only long enough to settle for a swing of his miniature golf club, and then he was off chasing his shot again. He was a kinetic charge unleashed on Bryan Park. You'd never have guessed he was born with a congenital deformity of his right foot.

And thanks to his mother, Janet Decker, and her foundation, the Clubfoot Shoe Exchange, children across the country are being given the same opportunity as Ryan.

Clubfoot is a fairly common birth defect that turns an individual's foot inward and often leaves the victim appearing to walk on the outside of the foot or ankle. Left untreated it can severely limit mobility.

Fortunately, treatment in the United States is fast improving and often successful. While a variety of methods are in practice, the most popular involves serial casting and the use of a Denis Browne bar, a brace worn at night made of a special shoe connected to a bar that stabilizes and directs the lower leg and foot.

While the infant and toddler-size shoes are relatively simple boots of plastic soles and leather straps not unlike sandals, they often cost nearly \$1,000 per pair. As the foot continues to grow, the shoe needs to be replaced. In Ryan's case, this was nearly every three or four months.

Despite enviable health insurance through the University of Cincinnati, the Deckers were repeatedly denied their claim on each pair of Ryan's shoes. A pattern formed where they'd request coverage, be denied by their provider, pay out-of-pocket for a pair of shoes, appeal the denial through the insurance company, and then finally receive reimbursement.

After going through the tedious process a number of times, Decker began wondering where all these perfectly good, and expensive, shoes were going; and what of the families with lesser or no insurance? She checked with their hospital, Cincinnati Children's, to see if any program existed. Due to liability concerns, the hospital could not oversee an exchange.

"It dawned on me. Why not just do it ourselves?" said Decker.

The Clubfoot Shoe Exchange swapped its first pair of shoes in June of 2012. Since, Decker estimates

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Bio Box

Janet Decker is an assistant professor at Indiana University's School of Education, teaching education law and policy courses. She served for two years on the faculty of the University of Cincinnati's school of education until her return to Bloomington.

Due to their hard work with Clubfoot Shoe Exchange, Janet Decker and her husband, John, were finalists for Cincinnati Children's 2013 Make a Difference Award. Angela Ervin of Cincinnati Children's Hospital, said the Deckers compassion was uncommon. "They really went above and beyond to help other families. They understood the difficulties of the insurance process, and did everything they could to help others have the same success as Ryan," said Ervin. Decker founded and continues to maintain with her husband the exchange to assist families whose children suffer from a congenital deformity of the foot.

they've facilitated the exchange of 160 pairs of the special shoes. They've done so by collecting used shoes at their Bloomington home and then distributing

them to needy families throughout the country. They've also coordinated exchanges via the organization's nerve center, its Facebook page.

As attention grows with the Facebook page, Decker hopes to register the organization for non-profit status to simplify the donation process, as the postage and packaging have begun to add up. Another goal is the establishment of similar exchanges in foreign countries. Thus far, Decker has helped arrange the setup of similar programs in Canada and Australia.

"We just want other children to have the same opportunity that Ryan has had," Janet Decker explained, as Ryan bolted past, chasing another golf ball through the park.

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