

STORY BY JOHN R. HUGHEY  
PHOTOS BY PERRY REICHANADTER

# Girl's best friend

Jessica Brookie cheered for the Carmel High School girls varsity basketball team as they played against Noblesville in November.

A therapy dog named Molly helped bring Jessica Brookie back to her family



Darlene Gosnell with Molly.



A furry, four-legged angel. That's the description 17-year-old Jessica Brookie coined for Molly, the therapy dog she credits with helping nudge her out of a five-week coma.

"I believe God brought Molly into my life for a reason," said Jessica, a junior at Carmel High School, who in January 2004 fell ill with Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome (ARDS), a life-threatening lung dysfunction.

During the holiday break of Jessica's freshman year, the teen knew something wasn't right. After a night at the movies with friends, Jessica ran across the theater's lobby and found herself gasping. At first, doctors thought she had pneumonia, but before she could recover, the condition worsened. Instead of returning to school at the end of the break, Jessica was in the St. Vincent Children's Hospital intensive care unit. At one point she quit breathing. Doctors employed ventilators to keep Jessica alive, prompting them to induce coma to ward off brain damage and allow her body to begin recovery.

Jessica's mom, Mimi Brookie, thinks one of the reasons therapy dog Molly came into their lives was to give the Carmel family hope during the five-month hospital stay, and especially during the frightening days of Jessica's coma.

"Jessica's first response came after Molly licked her hand. It was the first time we saw her smile," Brookie said. "We

were just elated to see some kind of reaction. Up to that point we had no indication of what type of mental capabilities Jessica would have."

A family friend had suggested bringing a therapy dog to visit Jessica. The friend contacted Darlene Gosnell, founder of TheraPets of Indiana, a Fishers-based nonprofit agency that trains canines for therapy work. Molly, a golden apricot cairn terrier, one of the group's nine dogs, is trained to work with coma patients. The 5-year-old Molly (at the time of Jessica's illness, Molly was 3) follows commands that stimulate, sometimes employing licks to the hand or simply sitting on the bed.

Jessica doesn't remember that first lick from Molly, but "my mom said that was the first time to see me smile again." Jessica first recalls interacting with Molly, on a day the pooch was wearing bows in Jessica's middle school colors. It was a detail Molly's trainer, Gosnell, said helped Jessica focus on what was happening, not just with the dog, but all around her.

Gosnell, a former special education teacher, began training therapy dogs after her own experience recovering from a car crash. She provides the therapy dog service free to patients. The dogs are taught to work in different settings.

Molly works with intensive care patients. Her role is largely to provide minimal stimulation through what Gosnell calls

"kissing," small licks to hands, arms and face. Other therapy dogs in Gosnell's program are trained to be held and petted before patients head into operating rooms, while others have been trained to sit on the beds of dying hospice patients.

"Molly works everywhere," Gosnell said.

After summer school classes to keep Jessica on track with classmates, and physical therapy to regain muscle and movement, the high school cheerleader finds inspiration from her ordeal. She is closer to her parents, she says.

Jessica maintained contact with Molly. In January, Jessica has plans to volunteer with Gosnell's TheraPets, learning how to handle and care for the dogs, as she prepares to take them into hospitals and nursing homes.

"My life has changed," said Jessica, whose story of recovery is included in a book about dogs and their human friends ("The Finishing Touch," by Steven L. SeRine and Elaine Voci). "I have a whole new faith."