

Berry second grader is a national champion for Children's Miracle Network Hospitals

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A Berry Elementary School second grader is a champion.

That's what ambassadors for the Children's Miracle Network Hospitals (CMN Hospitals) are called.

"As a champion, I get to do a lot of different things," said Samerya Montgomery.

That is an understatement. Samerya has been featured on materials on displays around the country promoting the nonprofit that raises funds and awareness for its 170 member hospitals which provide 32 million treatments each year.

This month, Samerya is pictured on boxes of Cheerios sold at Costco, a CMN Hospitals partner. She'll be a guest on Good Morning Washington on ABC May 21. It's the latest project that brings Samerya in the spotlight, a place her friends are used to seeing her.

"I think she's famous," said Kamiya Jones, a Berry second grader and Samerya's friend. "I see her everywhere. On a sign at Walmart, on TV, on cereal boxes."

"As a national champion, she has had some amazing opportunities," said Carletta Washington, Samerya's mother.

It's a competitive process to be chosen as a champion, said Jason Myers, director of content development for CMN Hospitals. Champions represent their local hospitals for a year, with about 150 children participating. From that group, a handful are selected to serve as national ambassadors the following year. "Because of her story, excellent involvement on the local level last year and exuberant personality, Samerya was selected as a national ambassador for Children's Miracle Network Hospitals in 2019." This year, CMN Hospitals has 11 national champions, including a sibling pair.

CMN Hospitals donate to children's health issues and work with hospitals, including Children's National in Washington, D.C. "Donations stay local to fund critical treatments and healthcare services, pediatric medical equipment and charitable care," Myers said. Since 1983, CMN Hospitals have raised more than \$6 billion, most of it comes from \$1 donations through its Miracle Balloon campaign.

"When people donate to these hospitals, the money is going to the hospital, it is going to the kids," Washington said. "Even a little bit, it will help the kids."

What is nephrotic syndrome?

Samerya was three years old when her parents noticed her eyes were swollen. They took her to local doctors who said she was fine, it was probably allergies. But the swelling didn't go down and Samerya's father knew it wasn't allergies. The family went to Children's National where Samerya was diagnosed with the kidney disorder nephrotic syndrome.

By the time she was 4, she had both kidneys removed and was on dialysis for more than a year before receiving a transplant. She's in remission but must take 11 medications in the morning and five at night including steroids, anti-rejection prescriptions and blood pressure medications.

Nephrotic syndrome is a kidney disorder caused by damage to the small blood vessel clusters in the kidneys that filter waste and excess water from the blood. The syndrome causes swelling and increases the risk of additional health problems, according to the Mayo Clinic. Samerya has focal segmental glomerulosclerosis (FSGS) which is scarring of the glomeruli — a filter in the kidney's unit. FSGS can be genetic, a result of another disease or for no reason at all.

Samerya has her moments of feeling down about her health problems. But she said talking to her mom helps her feel better.

"Samerya is a very sweet, thoughtful, mature kid for her age and I think that's because of all she's been through," Washington said. "She just brings light to everybody. I think she's an amazing child and I'm not just saying that because she's mine."

While not every kid has appeared on cereal boxes or in a national campaign with pictures of their face displayed at Walmart and Panda Express, in many ways Samerya is just like her peers. She enjoys reading, playing video games and going to the movies. Her favorite subject is math, she likes playing with Legos and going on mommy-daughter dates to get manicures. She also likes bringing awareness to an organization dedicated to helping children battling illness and injuries. And it's pretty exciting and even a little surprising seeing her picture when she's out and about.

"I see so many clones of me when I go out," Samerya said. When asked how many boxes of Cheerios bearing her picture her family has at home she said, "A thousand," before bursting into giggles. "Or maybe 30," she said. "I eat so many Cheerios, they're going to start coming out of my ears."

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