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Community Guide

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Sibs selected as N.J. Champion Children

Jackson residents have made significant progress since accident in 2006

BY PATRICIA YOCZIS Correspondent

Mackenzie Wight, 10, and her brother, Michael, 8, of Jackson, have been selected as the 2010 New Jersey Champion Children under a program of the Children's Miracle Network (CMN) that honors remarkable children who have overcome severe medical challenges.



Mackenzie Wight, 10, (r) and her brother, Michael, 8, of Jackson, have been selected as the 2010 New Jersey Champion Children under a program of the Children's Miracle Network that honors children who have overcome severe medical challenges. The Wight siblings recently had a chance to meet President Barack Obama (below) at the White House and to direct the president's attention to this campaign.

As ambassadors for thousands of New Jersey children who triumphed over medical adversities, Mackenzie and Michael were among the 55 champion children from every state and the District of Columbia who visited Washington, D.C., June 6-10 and met with President Barack Obama.

"Michael loves everything about President Obama and was



overwhelmed when the president shook his hand and held Michael's Obama doll that we just bought," said Nicole Wight, who with her husband, Aaron, accompanied their children. "Mackenzie was hoping to meet her idol, Sen. John McCain (R-Arizona), but was happy to settle for President Obama."

She said Obama spent considerable time with the children and their parents, and stayed for photos.

In addition to meeting the president and taking a tour of the White House, the Wights, natives of Jackson, toured Washington, D.C., had lunch at the U.S. Capitol and attended a Washington Nationals baseball game.

Also, Caressa Cameron, the 2010 Miss America from Virginia, and David Archuleta, the 2008 runner-up on "American Idol," accompanied the group on many of its outings.

"The trip was phenomenal and we were treated as royalty," said Wight.

The purpose of the trip, she said, was to bring awareness to the President and legislators of the need for funds for children's health care and the hospitals that specialize in children's health issues. All expenses were paid by Walmart and Sam's Club, which presented the champion child program, as well as numerous sponsors, including Marriott and Costco.

Wight said Christina Dellibovi, a child life therapist at the Children's Specialized Hospital in Mountainside, nominated Mackenzie and Michael to be champion children after their miraculous recovery from a serious car accident.

In 2006, she said, the children were spending the summer with their grandparents, Susan and Michael Ivanitsky in Jackson. On the way home from a day out, a truck struck the car their grandmother was driving. Their grandmother did not survive her injuries and Mackenzie and Michael suffered severe brain injuries that left them in comas.

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Mackenzie had an open skull fracture, a fractured collarbone and spent about a month in the hospital. Michael's injuries involved brain shearing where nerves were severed that resulted in limited neurological and motor functions. It was four months before he was released from the hospital.

The children were first taken to Jersey Shore University Medical Center in Neptune and then to the Children's Specialized Hospital.

At the time of the accident, Wight was living at Fort Drum, N.Y., and visiting her children

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on weekends, while her husband, Aaron, an Army staff sergeant, was serving his fourth deployment in Afghanistan. Through the Red Cross and Army officials, her husband, who is now an Army recruiter in Toms River, was home in three days, she said.

“I never thought anything was going to happen to the children or my mother,” said Wight. “It was my husband who worried me.”

She said help came from really good people.

“The personnel at both hospitals, I can’t praise enough then, and now with their continued help through the Children’s Miracle Network,” said Wight. “Everyone at Fort Drum and the people in Jackson were terrific, including my pastor, Father John Prokopiuk at St. Mary’s Russian Orthodox Church in Jackson.”

Wight said the children’s medical progress has been fantastic, and both children maintain A’s in school. Mackenzie is a fourth-grade pupil at the Switlik School in Jackson. She was right-handed but is now left-handed and plays lacrosse.

Michael, a first-grade pupil at the Elms Elementary School in Jackson, had an initial prognosis after the accident that said he would never walk or talk.

“Not only does he walk and talk, but he plays ice hockey with a special walker,” said Wight, who with her family are avid Philadelphia Flyers hockey fans.

The Wights maintain a hectic schedule of promoting local and national CMN events since notification of their children’s selection in December.

Nicole and the children were on the New York “CBS Early Show” in April, and May found them at a Walmart kickoff party in North Bergen with Ashley Shaffer, the 2010 Miss New Jersey from Millstone Township. On June 19 the children will travel to the Miss New Jersey Pageant in Ocean City.

In September the Wights will attend “Tiki Rocks the Square,” a CMN fundraiser in New York’s Times Square at the Hard Rock Café featuring performing artists and Tiki Barber, a former New York Giants running back. In November a reunion trip of CMN champion children is set for Walt Disney World in Florida.

“I never expected to be a parent of two children with special needs, but there is a reason for all of it,” Wight said. “I want people to know there is help out there. Every dollar raised by the events of the Children’s Miracle Network goes to local hospitals to help children and their families.”

The Children’s Miracle Network is an international organization that was founded in 1983 for children’s charities by Mick Shannon and Joe Lake and celebrity founders Marie Osmond and John Schneider. The organization’s logo is a red and yellow balloon.

The champion child ambassadors represent the 17,000 children served yearly at Children’s Specialized Hospital and the 17 million children treated every year at CMN member hospitals. As of 2008, more than \$3.4 billion has been raised for children’s hospitals.

