

Austin's Brobe creates superhero robes for kids with cancer, chronic illness

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"Cancer kind of sucks the childhood out of your kid," says JaNett Hill, whose daughter Elliott, 4, was diagnosed with a kidney cancer known as Wilms tumor that spread to her lungs.

Elliott, who lives in Georgetown, was diagnosed in January 2020 and went through treatments at McLane Children's Hospital in Temple, including removal of her right kidney and part of her lung as well as chemotherapy and radiation. Her final surgery was in October.

Now she will have scans done every three months to look for any signs of the cancer returning.

"We are blessed we are in this portion of the journey," Hill says.

During treatment in the hospital, kids are given a scratchy gown to wear that often doesn't fit. If they are having treatments at a clinic, they can wear their own clothes, but a T-shirt gets in the way of accessing the port in their chests where the chemotherapy enters the body.

Elliott, though, got to wear a prototype of a robe designed for kids with cancer or other chronic illnesses. The robe is the kid version of the one Austin-based

Brobe International Inc. has been making for adults with cancer or for after other surgeries — but it's much more fun.

It comes with two detachable capes and two matching caps similar to ones doctors wear in the operating room as well as a superhero mask. They sell for \$79.99 at thebrobe.com/collections/brobekids.



Kids might think the robe's magic is in the mask and the capes, but the true magic is in the way it's designed. It has snaps from the shoulders down the arms that allow the staff to access ports as well as run tubes and wires in and out of the

robe. Inside, it has pockets that can be snapped into different positions to hold drains or other medical equipment.

It's made of soft antimicrobial cotton fabric that is lightweight. Fabric is important, Hill says, because kids going through treatment "get so overstimulated with everybody touching them." Elliott was particularly picky about her clothes. "If it didn't feel soft, she didn't want to wear it," Hill says.

Austin mom Allison Schickel started Brobe in 2012 after being inspired by a friend's experience with cancer. Two years ago, she was speaking at the University of Texas when she met a woman who had a son with cancer. He would sit around in only his diaper while medical staff accessed his port to give him cancer treatment. He died when he was 3, the same age as Schickel's son at the time.



“It was one of those times that I had to pull over,” she says, when she thought about this boy’s story.

She met with the mom, who brought her a onesie that her son had worn during treatment while he was still a baby. There wasn’t much for him to wear during treatment as a young boy.

Schickel started developing a children’s robe and tried to find nurses and child life specialists to make sure it met the needs of both the kids and the medical staff. It was a struggle. Hospitals wouldn’t call her back.

She had a prototype and needed to test it out on a real kid to make sure it would work.

She was connected to a friend of the Hills who knew she had a prototype and wanted to buy it for Elliott.

Schickel wouldn’t sell it to her. Instead she offered to have a prototype made for Elliott in her size and with a Spider-Man print cape, which was Elliott’s favorite superhero. The seamstress who made it for Elliott had lost her own son to cancer at age 5.



Last summer, Schickel and her family and the Hills met at a park with everyone wearing masks and presented the superhero robe to Elliott. She put it on and started running around.

"It was a beautiful thing," Schickel says. She decided to name the robe the Elliott Superhero Robe.

"We have honestly felt so honored to have her name attached to it," JaNett Hill says.

Elliott and JaNett Hill were able to give a lot of feedback to Schickel about what worked about the robe during

treatment and what didn't. She made adjustments. Instead of fixed internal pockets, she created pockets that could be snapped into eight different places depending on where the child needed different drains, ostomy or catheter bags to be.



Schickel wanted other kids with cancer to have a robe that made them feel powerful, too, but everything was happening at a time when Brobe was struggling because of the



pandemic. As people initially delayed getting care for cancer or put off non-emergency surgeries, Brobe saw its orders drop. The company had to move out of its office and into a

storage unit and had to let go of staff.

Schickel says she was trying to "penny pinch" anywhere she could to stay afloat, but she says, the moment she saw Elliott put on that robe, she said, "I'm going to do everything it's going to take to get them into production."

She wanted to bring kids with cancer and other illnesses some joy and a little bit of normalcy, she says. "It makes them feel like a kid again," she says. "It brings back that joy, to put a smile on their face during a dark time."

She says it felt like a divine mission. "It was the same feeling I had when I started the recovery Brobe," she says. "I knew I had to do it."

She called her manufacturer and was going to borrow the money if she had to, but she applied for and won a \$10,000 grant from BBVA and Austin Business Journal.

She ordered the first 300 robes, which arrived in December, and another 300. People began buying them and giving money to have them donated to kids with cancer. So far 170 kids have received a donated robe either through individual donations or through hospitals using grant money to give them to kids.

"My hope is that they just blow up with success," JaNett Hill says. "I am honestly so amazed by Allison and the whole team. The work they are doing is so amazing. It's inspiring to even play the smallest role in all of this."

Families share pictures of their kids on Instagram wearing the Elliott robes. Schickel now follows those Instagram accounts and sees what's going on with those kids' medical treatment.

"This business is an emotional business, whether it's cancer patients or heart surgery, but when you add kids to the mix, I've broken down more than I can count," she says.