

# “No act of kindness is too small!”

With just a few markers, construction paper and a kind heart, you can work a miracle of caring, a hospitalized Jen Rubino discovered when she received a handmade card from a stranger. And so 15-year-old Jen thought: *I can change other kids' lives, too!*

Jen Rubino stirred in her hospital bed in the ICU, awake again after only minutes of sleep. After this latest operation—hip surgery at 15!—IV morphine barely took the edge off her pain.

Even worse, though, was how *down* the Parkridge, Illinois, teen felt.

Since age 11, when what had seemed like muscle strain from too much gymnastics had led to a shocking diagnosis—a connective tissue disorder and bone disease—Jen had endured nearly a dozen surgeries. And she was so tired of being sick.

Jen missed doing hand-springs, walkovers and flips. But what she *really* missed were the ordinary things. Going to school. Hanging out with friends. Even homework!

Her family spent every moment they could at her side; her friends were constantly in touch; and the nurses were like angels. Yet still, sometimes, she felt so alone.

I wish I could go home, she sighed, tears welling in her eyes. I wish I could be . . . normal. But she knew this operation would not be her last. How will I ever get through this? she wondered sadly.

Just then, something at the edge of her blanket caught her eye. While she was sleeping, volunteers had dropped off a handmade card.

*Stay strong!* she read.

Wow! Jen thought, stunned. Someone she didn't even know cared and had *made* this. For *her*.

Pressing the card to her heart, a smile—her first in days!—tugged at the corners of Jen's mouth as she thought: Whoever you are, thank you!

## Chain of caring

Setting the card on her bedside table, Jen reached for it in the days to come whenever she felt lonely or low. And every time, the bright colors and heartfelt words somehow made her feel better.

Even weeks later, as Jen continued healing at home, she marveled at the power of that card. She knew her team at the hospital and her family and friends were responsible for pulling her through. But in a very real way, that little card was, too.

So Jen had an idea. Still stuck in bed, she couldn't do much. But she could make cards—cards with uplifting messages.

*I believe in you, she wrote. You're more amazing than you realize.*

*You rock!*

*Stay strong.*

When her friends visited and saw what she was doing, they began making cards, too—and told other kids at school. And when they heard that a handmade card had made Jen feel better in the hospital, they thought: I want to do that for someone, too!

Within weeks, Jen's dad was mailing a box of handmade cards to their local children's hospital. And after giving them out, the staff e-mailed Jen: *They meant so much to the children and their families!*

This really does make a difference! Jen smiled.

## Miracles with magic markers

That spring, as Jen spread the word on Facebook, her local library began hosting card-making events. And after tech-savvy Jen launched a website (CardsForHospitalizedKids.com), middle schoolers in California, bank tellers in North Carolina and even a gymnastics team in Georgia all sent cards. So many that Jen could mail them to more hospitals, where kids did something they hadn't done in a while.

They smiled.

Damon, a teenager who was undergoing chemo,



read *Fight to the Finish* and thought: I will!

Faith, a little girl healing from an amputation, read *You Are Beautiful* and beamed.

High school senior Mackenzie, who was waiting for a heart transplant, read *Stay Strong* . . . and was reminded she had it in her to hang on until she got her miracle.

*Please send more!* hospitals e-mailed Jen. And as scout troops, school clubs, church groups, sports teams, store employees and families heard about what Jen was doing, the cards kept coming—because it was fun, easy . . . and it felt good. People even donated stamps and mailing envelopes, too!

Meanwhile, children's hospitals from Atlanta to Sacramento tweeted: *Your cards spread hope* . . .

They kept Jen going, too. Because each time she faced another operation—nine more in total—she knew she could get through the pain and the missed weeks of school, because now she had something important to do: Help other kids through.

So far, Cards for Hospitalized Kids (CFHK) has sent cards to 40,000 seriously ill kids in 50 states.

Today, Jen is running CFHK from college! “Lifting others up lifted me up!” she tells everybody.

But every so often, she still looks at that card she received in the hospital.

“It's amazing how much stronger that simple card made me feel,” Jen says. “I learned that no act of kindness is too small, and that *anything* is possible when people come together!”

—Andrea Florczak

“Everyone can do simple things to make a difference, and every little bit really does count.”

STELLA MCCARTNEY



## Make a heartfelt card!

Want to cheer someone up? Follow Jen's top tips:

✓ **Be bold!** “Bright colors are uplifting,” Jen says. “Kids light up when they get a cheery card.” Which work best? A Dutch study found folks were happiest around yellow and green hues!

✓ **Focus on the person!** “Avoid talking about someone's illness and instead say something like, ‘You shine brighter than the sun!’” Jen says. “It's a reminder that life is about more than just this obstacle.”

✓ **Get crafty!** Making one for a kid? “Use a cartoon character!” Jen says. “Kids love getting a card with a cartoon sticker that says something like ‘Mickey and I think you're amazing!’”

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