ELLA CASANO WAS diagnosed with idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura (ITP) when she was 7 years old. ITP is an autoimmune disease that causes the body to destroy its own platelets, putting patients at risk for bleeding or injury. Ella’s diagnosis requires her to receive intravenous immune globulin (IVIG) infusions every eight weeks, a prospect that was initially daunting for a young child. But, in a classic “turn-lemons-into-lemonade” scenario, her childhood fear of the IV bag became the inspiration for an invention that is now bringing comfort to children around the country. We chatted with Ella’s mom, Meg Casano, to learn more about her entrepreneurial daughter and her innovative idea: Medi Teddy.

IG Living: Tell us a little bit about Ella’s condition; when did you know something was wrong?
Meg: When Ella was younger, we started to notice huge bruises on her body. One day after climbing a rope ladder, the entire insides of her legs and thighs were a huge dark bruise. Every morning, she would have blood on her pillow because her nose and gums would be oozing. Her bruises seemed unusual based on her activities. Her pediatrician suggested we have her blood work checked, and we found out her platelet count was only 13,000.

IG Living: How long did it take to get a diagnosis?
Meg: I became concerned about the bruising when she was 2 years old. We actually saw three pediatricians in two states seeking answers, only to be told she was just “an active kid.” I finally found our current pediatrician who really listened to me and checked her blood. It was a great lesson for me to trust my gut and not be afraid to get second (and third and fourth) opinions! We believe she may have had ITP for several years before she was actually diagnosed at age 7.

IG Living: What is her treatment plan with IVIG?
Meg: It will likely change over time, but for now she gets IVIG approximately every eight weeks at our local infusion center. She does experience migraines from the IVIG, so she gets a steroid taper for six days after each infusion to help mitigate those, but she still misses two to three days of school after each infusion.

IG Living: How is Ella’s health today?
Meg: Between infusions, she is a normal kid! She’s active in her school and church community, and she is a great student. The IVIG lasts for about four weeks, and then her platelets begin to dip very low again over the next few weeks. Right now, she only gets infusions when her platelet count is below 10,000. So, there are several weeks every cycle when she is walking around with dangerously low platelet counts and is restricted in her activities.

IG Living: What inspired the creation of Medi Teddy?
Meg: Ella had to make an invention for school, and she wanted to create something unique. She liked the idea of coming up with something that could help her and other kids like her, so she started brainstorming ideas. For Ella, one of the scariest parts of infusions is seeing the big bags of medicine hanging on her pole. It’s funny because most adults focus on the IV insertion; we forget the equipment itself can be very overwhelming. Ella wanted to hide the bags of medicine, and that’s how Medi Teddy was created!
She made the first prototype by cutting up a stuffed penguin and using a hot glue gun to make a little pouch on the back but later decided a teddy bear was a more natural fit with the name.

**IG Living:** Tell us about your fundraising efforts.

**Meg:** We started a Go Fund Me account with the hope of raising $5,000 from our local community so Ella could have 500 Medi Teddys manufactured. We figured we’d be driving them around in the back of my car and begging kids to try them out. We had no idea Medi Teddy would become almost instantly accepted worldwide and more than quadruple our fundraising effort. What was so amazing to us was the sheer number of people who donated. It wasn’t like there were a few huge donors; there were thousands of people who donated small amounts and, together, it added up to more than we ever dreamed.

**IG Living:** What are the next steps to bringing Medi Teddy to market?

**Meg:** We realized pretty quickly there was a lot more demand for Medi Teddy than we ever thought, and Ella and I would need some help supplying these to kids all over the country and even the world. So, the nonprofit side of the business will continue to raise money, accept donations and give Medi Teddys to kids in our community. But, we have also been able to create a social enterprise side of the business that will allow corporations, hospitals, charities or even individuals who want to purchase batches of Medi Teddys to give to specific children or hospitals.

**IG Living:** What is the goal with the Medi Teddy nonprofit?

**Meg:** Our goal continues to be to give Medi Teddys to children who would like one so they feel more comforted during IV infusions.

**IG Living:** What kind of response have you had from the medical community?

**Meg:** We have had dozens of emails from doctors and nurses who would like these for their patients. Also, many heads of departments in many hospitals from around the world have reached out asking for samples when they arrive!

**IG Living:** What advice do you have for other families facing chronic illness?

**Meg:** Oh, this is a hard one. I happen to have Crohn’s disease myself and get bimonthly infusions, too, so it’s been really hard to see my daughter have to go through the same thing. Chronic illness can wear you down if you let it, and this is something I have struggled to get better at with time. I tell myself and Ella it’s OK to have hard days, take days off and go easy on ourselves. It’s OK to not feel like that “fighter” everyone thinks you are every once in a while. Just be sure you don’t stay in that place; shake it off, get help if you need to and find some things to focus on that you feel good about, because that always helps. And, I think for both of us, Medi Teddy has been incredibly therapeutic. We’ve heard from thousands of people going through the same things we are, and it has created the most incredible feeling of connection.

**IG Living:** What are Ella’s hopes for the future?

**Meg:** Right now, she says she wants to be a doctor, specifically a hematologist, so she can help other kids with blood disorders like her. I know she would be really good at that.

Editor’s note: To purchase a Medi Teddy or to make a donation to have a Medi Teddy sent to a child, visit medi-teddy.org.

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