

Flynn's new cause rooted in family

By Akilah Johnson

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Raymond L. Flynn, the former Boston mayor, walked through the North End, shaking hands and saying hello to those who recognized him. At Hanover and Parmenter streets, Flynn and his wife, Kathy, paused to share a laugh with an old friend about his days in office and his presidential connections.

But this stroll wasn't about politics. It was about Braeden, the Flynn's grandson.

Flynn has no shortage of grandchildren — his two sons and four daughters have brought him 17. But Braeden gets most of their attention, and has become the private preoccupation of a man who had devoted his days to public service. The 4-year-old has a rare neurological disorder, called a small cerebellum, which means he can't walk without falling and is unable to speak. There is no cure.

"Mr. Mayor, how are you? Is that your kid?" asked a police officer directing traffic near the Greenway carousel as Flynn pushed Braeden's ocean-themed stroller from the New England Aquarium to Galleria Umberto pizzeria.

"My grandson," Flynn responded, as Braeden smothered a newly purchased stuffed animal with hugs and kisses. "I like the Red Sox, and he likes penguins."

Flynn, 71, was mayor from 1984 to 1993, when he resigned to become the US ambassador to the Vatican and moved to Rome. He returned in 1997. A year later, he lost his bid for a seat in the US House and retired.

During his time in office, Flynn was a populist mayor. He rode snow plows, jogged to every neighborhood, and advocated for the homeless as well as the parents of special-needs children. His hardscrabble Southie roots as the son of a dock worker hospitalized for years with tuberculosis shaped many of his public policies.

Health care, Flynn said, has always been a passion. As mayor, he worked to ensure that Boston City Hospital stayed a place where people could receive medical care, regardless of their ability to pay. "I don't think it should be a political question," he said. "You should do everything you can to help people with sicknesses."

But health care has become a personal mission. Much of Flynn's retirement is consumed by Braeden.

The toddler, with bright brown eyes and a mischievous smile, spends almost every Tuesday night at Nana and Papa's house, and most Wednesdays they do something together, usually a trip to a South Boston park. Braeden is the only one of Flynn's grandchildren with special needs, and Flynn is constantly searching for scientific answers for Braeden's medical problems.

The cerebellum is the part of the brain that controls balance, coordination, and muscle control. Since Braeden's is too small, he can't talk, and falls when he walks.

He wears blue leg braces, but his grandmother said they don't help much. He wears a body brace, too, but she said it doesn't help much either.

The helmet he wears to cushion the impact when he falls doesn't always stop the hurt, evident by a small, deep-blue lump healing over his right eye.

"Every night and every morning, I just say my prayers to God that they find a way for Braeden to walk, because it's heartbreaking every time you see him fall," Kathy Flynn said.

But Braeden is far from helpless.

The 4-year-old can silence the once-powerful mayor of Boston in ways most can not. He places his index finger over his lips, shakes his head from side to side and says "shh," which is how the toddler recently let his grandfather know an over-articulated rendition of the alphabet song had become tiresome.

"He does that when he doesn't want to continue, so there's something going on there," Kathy Flynn said as her husband kissed the top of his grandson's head and Braeden smiled impishly.

Braeden also imitates his grandfather by carrying around Papa's reading glasses, pen, and paper, as well as the cellphone.

Braeden clearly enjoys being with other children. His grandparents sometimes bring him to an indoor play area at South Shore Plaza because it has a padded floor, so he isn't hurt when he falls.

During a recent trip to the play area, Braeden took hesitant, stumbling steps as other children his age darted from one oversized, cartoon-like toy to the next. His peers jumped inside the cockpit of a purple spaceship and scrambled behind the wheel of a bright, blue car. He played, too, but crawled through instead of climbing on a make-believe log.

The fact that he moved differently from his peers seemed to have no effect on his playtime joy. A smile never left his face.

"Papa's boy. Papa's big boy," Flynn said as Braeden, hands in the pocket of his Patriots sweatshirt, made his way to his grandfather with steps more like that of an infant than a preschooler. Behind him, his grandmother shadowed his every step, ready to catch him when he fell.

Braeden O'Doherty was diagnosed with a small cerebellum when he was about 1, according to his grandparents. His parents noticed that he was picking up skills slowly, and missing various milestones for child development.

"Doctors kept saying, 'We'll wait and see; we'll wait and see.' But there was no improvement," said Kathy, 69.

And so began the family's ongoing odyssey to figure out how best to help Braeden. Flynn said his grandson has seen neurologists and geneticists, had CAT scans and MRIs. He has undergone physical therapy, and will soon start speech therapy.

Braeden's mother, Nancy O'Doherty, declined to be interviewed, saying through her father that she gets too emotional when talking about Braeden's condition. Braeden has two siblings — a sister two years older and a baby brother.

"His mother, she's tried everything and anything they suggest," Kathy Flynn said.

As deeply committed Catholics, the Flynn's believe in the power of prayer. They go to Mass most Sundays, at South Boston's Gate of Heaven parish, and they bring Braeden along.

The trio is there most Tuesday evenings, too, praying the rosary with about two dozen others. Parishioners recite the devotional prayers to Mary, mother of Jesus, in unison, asking her to intercede on their behalf.

Each writes prayers on a slip of white paper they place into a wicker basket.

The Flynn's prayer intention is simple and poignant: They ask God to heal their grandson by steadying his stride.

And then, reciting the "sorrowful mysteries" of the rosary, they ask Mary to pray with them. On one recent Tuesday, the chorus of Hail Marys and Our Fathers lulled Braeden to sleep as he sat in Flynn's lap, sucking his thumb.

Flynn goes to every doctor's appointment with Braeden, and said he has met dozens of families in similar situations: their children are sick, and they are searching for answers that often don't come.

"They don't have a name for it," he said. "They can't even tell you exactly what it is. No one is giving up, but it's going to require God and science."

Flynn's faith means that God and science sometimes seem at odds — the Catholic Church opposes embryonic stem cell research, which scientists say might help research in a variety of diseases.

Flynn penned an op-ed piece about the tension last fall, saying that he was "filled with both the despair of not being able to really help this beautiful kid and the hope that there must be, in this age of scientific sophistication, something that can be done for Braeden. I thought, could stem cells be the answer?"

His conclusion, he wrote, was to support adult stem cell research, but not embryonic stem cell research, because, he said, "destroying one human life in order to assist another clearly violates the most basic Christian values."

Scientists say that a small cerebellum is often associated with children born prematurely, or with genetic abnormalities, but Braeden does not fall into either category, according to Flynn.

The condition can also be caused by oxygen deprivation, or by infections in utero.

It is not clear how Braeden developed the condition or what his prognosis is.

"I've seen babies with a little bit of coordination trouble and a little bit of cognition trouble and not too much else to infants who have pretty bad motor function and cognition," said Dr. Joseph Volpe, former chief of neurology at Children's Hospital. "It's just hard to predict."

There are no medicines or treatments for children born with Cerebellar Hypoplasia, which is the clinical name for a small cerebellum, according to Dr. Michael Goldstein, a pediatric neurologist and former vice president of the American Academy of Neurology.

"If you're born without an arm, there's no drug you can take to make it grow back, and the brain is even more delicate," he said. "But hope is very important, and none of us should ever lose hope."

Hope is the alarm clock that wakes Flynn up most mornings, before sunrise, so he can scour the headlines searching for news of a scientific breakthrough.

"He does spend hours looking up information," Kathy Flynn said.

Flynn is an avid reader of the science section of London's The Guardian newspaper online. And

often the first thing he grabs at bookstores is the New England Journal of Medicine. When he comes across an interesting article, he e-mails it to all six of his children and his wife.

“We’re a close family, and we don’t quit,” he said. “God’s working miracles for him and we don’t even know.”

Akilah Johnson can be reached at ajohnson@globe.com.

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