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## Help 'n' hands

By Christina L. Esparza, Staff Writer

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MONROVIA — Julie Fish often finds herself outlining the traces of her son Lance's tiny hand etched in clay.

The 2-and-a-half year old pressed down on the wet slab many months ago during one of his many trips to Paint 'N' Play in Old Town Monrovia, where he painted on skateboards and ran up and down the room reserved especially for him.

With hundreds of photographs and a million memories of the toddler, the handprint is a cherished item that holds him close to Fish's heart. Not long after he created it, Lance succumbed to cancer.

"I don't know how to express how much our son Lance's handprint plaque means to us," she said. "His plaque is a beautiful symbolic impression we physically have to honor and memorialize his recent sudden passing."

Lance was one of about 75 City of Hope patients who created a legacy handprint at Paint 'N' Play free of charge.

The sisters who own the studio, Lisa Barrios and Rachel Quimayousie, have been running the Hold 'N' Hands, Help 'N' Hearts project for about five years.

It started as a favor for an employee in the neuro-oncology department at City of Hope and from then on blossomed.

"It helps the heart, and sometimes the heart helps the healing,"

Barrios said.

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Of the roughly 75 patients who participated in the legacy project, two have died, Barrios said. Although they have created so many pieces, each one is made with special care by Quimayousie, a talented ceramic

artist who incorporates the patient's favorite colors and hobbies.

For instance, Lance's plaque is decorated with a choo-choo train — his favorite thing in the whole world.

And the process is fun, too.

"Oh boy, Lance loved Rachel swishing his hands in the clay," Fish said. "What little child doesn't like getting to be creative and a little messy?"

While always fun to create, the process can tug at the heartstrings.

"It's hard sometimes because you know they may be succumbing to this," Quimayousie said with a trembling voice and watery eyes.

The pressure is intense for the sisters, since they have to twice heat the handprints in a 2,000-degree kiln. Ceramic pieces can sometimes crack and explode.

Normally, it's an easy fix; the child is called in to do another one. In the case of cancer patients, though, that can't always be possible.

But Barrios said not one legacy piece has been damaged in the kiln.

The legacy plaques are not reserved for children. City of Hope patients of all ages are welcome to one. The most recent piece is from a 75-year-old woman who just hours before underwent a blood transfusion.

The project is paid for by donations, or, as Barrios said, "pennies from heaven." She looked into creating a nonprofit foundation, but quickly learned it would be a lot more expensive than to put all donations into clay and supplies.

Despite the donations, or lack thereof, Barrios said she and her sister agreed to keep the program running, even if the money comes out of their own pockets.

After all, the look on the patients' and their families' faces are priceless.

"When it's handed over to a patient, you could almost hear angels singing," Barrios said.

For information on Help 'N' Hands, Heal 'N' Hearts call (626) 256-4848.

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