

# TPHS student's personalized 'Picks' brighten stays for hospitalized kids

BY KRISTINA HOUCK

Born with a life-threatening liver disease, Nick Wallace was sick and hospitalized for most of his young life. Having stayed many long days and weeks in the hospital, the Del Mar boy, now 15, quickly learned how to pass the time.

"People have called me a master at entertaining myself," Nick said. "Even if I didn't have any toys, I could find just about anything in the room to entertain myself."

When Nick's collection of games and toys helped a friend during chemotherapy treatment, he realized more children in the hospital could benefit from the items that helped him.

"I just thought that since he liked it so much, it would be cool if I could mass-produce this stuff and give it to other kids," said Nick, a freshman at Torrey Pines High School.

Nick's Picks was founded September 2012, the same month Nick received a liver transplant at UCLA Medical Center. Through the nonprofit, Nick delivers backpacks filled with games, toys and comfort items to children facing long-term hospitalization. From a mini basketball hoop to soft lacrosse socks, every item is of significance to Nick, in particular a stuffed harp seal.

"Whenever I have him, it helps me get away to a place where there's no pain, no sadness, no worry," said Nick, noting that his stuffed seal was his very first stuffed animal. "I just feel like a harp seal can do that for everybody else."

Since establishing the organization, Nick has distributed close to 400 backpacks. He ships or personally drops them off at

Rady Children's Hospital-San Diego, San Diego Ronald McDonald House, Ronald McDonald House at Stanford and UCLA Medical Center.

He recalled one special visit to UCLA, when he delivered a backpack to a patient who had undergone four transplants and been hospitalized for a year.

"It really pulled on my heartstrings when they told me that the Mad Libs I had given him in the backpack made him laugh," Nick recalled. "He hadn't talked in a year."

"It just puts a smile on my face to know that I'm making people happier and have a better hospital stay."

Nick was born with biliary atresia, a disease that blocks the bile ducts and causes liver failure. At a little more than three weeks old, he underwent his first procedure, and several surgeries followed in the years after. After Nick's three-week stay for his liver transplant, however, he hasn't been admitted to a hospital since.

Now focused on school, lacrosse and his charity, Nick hopes to expand Nick's Picks and distribute backpacks to more hospitals. It costs about \$50 to assemble each backpack.

"The more donations we get, the more backpacks we can provide, the more smiles we can put on little kids' faces," said Nick, who recently received a \$10,000 college scholarship from the Montage Memory Makers competition, recognizing youth ages 13-17 who make a difference in their community. "It all adds up to that."

For information or to donate to Nick's Picks, visit [www.nicks Picks.org](http://www.nicks Picks.org).



Nick Wallace, left, and his friend Parker Shaw with one of the 'Nick's Picks' backpacks. Nick and Parker became friends through Nick's visits to hospitals.



Left: Nick Wallace with his backpacks. Courtesy photos

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