

Local & State

Teen athlete's pains and bruises worried her family. The diagnosis was devastating

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One Saturday, Sofia Macario was playing soccer, her favorite sport. The next day, she was very tired and in pain. There were bruises on her legs. Her mother, Ereida Arellano, thought Sofia had been injured while playing. But two days later, doctors gave her a diagnosis: leukemia.

That was in January of this year, and the start of what Arellano describes as almost biblical suffering: two chemotherapy treatments per week, constant visits to doctors and blood checks and one of the hardest medical procedures, a spinal tap, which Sofia must undergo frequently.

Sofia Macario, 14, is one of the people selected to receive assistance through Wish Book, a Miami Herald and el Nuevo Herald program that is making its 40th annual appeal to the South Florida community to help the needy.

FAMILY NEEDS HELP TO MOVE AND GET A SECOND CAR

Sofia suffered pancreatitis as a result of the chemotherapy and spent one month in a hospital. Her mother had to stop working to take care of her, pushing the wheelchair that the girl now requires and encouraging her when she feels weak.

"Before all this, Sofia was a little chubby, but now she's lost weight," Arellano said. The pancreatitis forced a halt in her treatment, but the chemotherapy was changed and now she's



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Sofia Macario, center, holds Caramelo next to her brother, Kevin, and her sister, Lizette, at their home in Coral Springs.



responding well.

"She's stronger, moves more around the house, is receiving mental-health therapy by phone as well as physical therapy to improve her bone mobility," the mother added. She does not believe her daughter is out of danger but is holding on to whatever optimistic signals that she receives from the doc-

tors.

The family is also facing economic problems because when Arellano takes care of Sofia in the hospital, her husband has to miss his construction job to take care of their other children: Kevin, who is 15, and Lizette, who is 18 and autistic.

"The other car we had broke down and we could not repair it," said Arellano, who now drives her husband to work and keeps their only vehicle in case of an emergency.

And when mold developed in their apartment,

they were forced to move. They had to spend nearly \$5,000 for the new place. It has only two bedrooms, so the parents sleep in the living room while the boy sleeps in one bedroom and the girls share the other.

"It's very noisy here, and I worry my neighbors smoke a lot. The smoke comes in under the door, and sometimes I have to put down towels to block it," said Arellano, who wants help moving to a better place.

The Macario family was also hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Everyone ex-

cept the oldest child, Lizette, got it. Sofia received special medicines to treat the disease.

"She cannot bleed or fall," said Arellano. What's more, her husband lost his mother this year to the virus.

Sofia was nominated for Wish Book by the Jessica June Children's Cancer Foundation, which is based in Fort Lauderdale. The foundation helps the family with rent but asks other people to help buy gifts for the children because the family's many setbacks this year have left them unable to bear those costs.

"The family has faced many problems as it tries to focus on the treatment and survival of Sofia," said Sandra Muvdi, president and executive director of the foundation that she created in memory of her daughter, Jessica June Eiler Muvdi, who died from cancer in 2003.

SOFIA'S DREAMS

Sofia was diagnosed in January, almost a year ago, but she has not lost the outlook of a typical 14-year-old. She likes soccer, reggaeton — her favorite singer is Ozuna — and clothes, especially clothes from H&M, Windsor and Macy's.

"I also want a smart TV so I can watch Netflix," and new clothes for Christmas, she told el Nuevo Herald. Her favorite colors are blue and turquoise.

A more modern PlayStation on which she can play her favorite games, Fall Guys and Just Dance, would be a good distraction for Sofia because she spends so much time at home. A laptop would allow her to go to school online and stay connected to the world. She already has a dog, Caramelo, which helps her and misses her when she's in the hospital, but wants another dog, a Yorkie, to complete a family that loves her.