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Granting Catiebug's final wish

In the magical world of Harry Potter, a little girl found comfort from cancer. In his creator, she found a true friend.

By **PAUL GRONDAHL**, Staff writer
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Park -- upon a time, a little girl who believed in magic fell in love with the Harry Potter books her mom read to her.

Her name was Catie Hoch. One day, doctors found a tumor in her kidney. She was 6. Neuroblastoma, an aggressive childhood cancer, quickly spread to her liver, lungs and spinal column.

Surgeons removed her kidney and adrenal gland, three-quarters of her liver and portions of her lungs.

She endured seven rounds of high-dose chemotherapy, radiation and numerous clinical drug trials. They made her violently ill. The sparkle drained from her blue eyes. She lost her curly blond hair.

"She never complained or asked, why me?" Catie's mom said. "She was a ray of sunshine."

Catie loved the beauty of ladybugs. Her nickname was Catiebug.

Catie left her dad, two younger brothers and friends behind when she and her mom moved to New York City while she received treatment at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center.

Catie rode the train to Penn Station dressed as Harry Potter.

Sick, scared and living in a strange place, Catie took comfort in J.K. Rowling's best-selling stories of good triumphing over evil.

She and her mom stayed at a Ronald McDonald House for 18 months, returning home for a visit every six weeks or so. They read all the Harry Potter books, one after the other.

While Catie was awaiting chemo treatments or having her body scanned to detect the advancing cancer, her mother's soothing voice and the mesmerizing cadence of Rowling's narratives lifted the little girl through her darkest hours.

They were nearing the end of Rowling's third book in the series,



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"Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban," when doctors said Catie was losing her fight with cancer.

Catie had a wish. She wanted to have her mother read her book four, "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire." But Rowling was still writing it and the book wasn't due out for many months. Catie did not have that long to live.

A friend of a friend of Catie's sent an e-mail to Rowling's publisher in England, explaining about Catie's terminal illness and her wish.

A short while later, an e-mail arrived.

Dear Catie. I am working very hard on book four at the moment -- on a bit that involves some new creatures Hagrid has brought along for the care of Magical Creatures classes. You are an extremely brave person and a true Gryffindor. With lots of love, J.K. Rowling (Jo to anybody in Gryffindor).

Rowling sent Catie a plush stuffed owl named Pigwidgeon (a character in her book) for Valentine's Day along with a card. Two weeks after Valentine's Day, Rowling wrote again.

Well, we are having gales here in Edinburgh at the moment, and because I live in an old house, the windows are rattling like mad as I type. It's a bit spooky. I still haven't finished book four, and oh dear it is so long ... do you think people will mind? I just can't see any way to make it shorter.

Lots of love, Jo XXX

Catie dictated her replies to her mom, who typed them into their home computer and sent them to the author by e-mail. Mostly, Catie talked about the intricacies of the Harry Potter plot, her family and friends.

I love you even more for telling me to make book four long, because I am worried about how long it's getting. You've cheered me up a lot.

Lots of love. Your friend right back. Jo XXX

Soon, the cancer invaded Catie's brain. Doctors didn't think she would live until her 9th birthday on March 13. Her parents moved up the celebration. Catie was placed in hospice care. Her mother was taught how to administer pain medication. Catie became too weak to be carried upstairs. Her parents set up a bed in a room off the living room.

Catie defied doctors' predictions and made it through her birthday. She received a card and presents from Rowling, a plush cat and a dream decoder book.

Spring arrived, and Catie lapsed into a coma. When she awoke, she

asked her mom to invite several of her girlfriends. Catie gave her American Girl dolls to her friends.

Catie drifted in and out of consciousness. The end was near. Catie's mom relayed this information to Rowling in an e-mail.

A phone call came to the Hochs' Clifton Park home from Edinburgh, Scotland, on a Sunday afternoon. It was Rowling. She wanted to read parts of book four to Catie.

"We laid Catie down on the living room couch, and Jo read to her over the phone. Catie's face just lit up," her mom recalled.

Rowling called three or four more times to read to Catie, but Catie started failing so badly she couldn't receive any more calls.

Catie died on May 18, 2000. She was 9, a third-grader at Chango Elementary School.

Three days later, Rowling wrote a message of condolence.

Dear Gina and Larry. I have been away again. I've only just received your message.

I have been praying that Catie would be released, that she would go where she can wait happily and painlessly for the rest of us to join her. But there are no words to express how sorry I am.

I consider myself privileged to have had contact with Catie. I can only aspire to being the sort of parent both of you have been to Catie during her illness. I am crying so hard as I type. She left footprints on my heart all right.

With much love, Jo

Rowling continued to write to Catie's family in the ensuing weeks and shared in their feelings of grief and loss.

I would love to hear from you if you ever feel the inclination, to know how you're really doing. And 'lousy' is just as acceptable an answer as any other. My love to you, Larry and the boys. Jo XXX

Rowling replied to messages of gratitude from Catie's parents.

I look back at Catie's e-mails to me and happiness shines out of each and every one. Please don't thank me for anything I did, because I feel truly honoured to have known your daughter, however briefly. Jo XXX

Catie's parents -- Gina Peca, a homemaker, and Larry Hoch, a tax lawyer for General Electric Co. -- established a nonprofit public charity in Catie's memory.

The Catie Hoch Foundation raised \$120,000 in two years and made

gifts to Sloan-Kettering and to Ronald McDonald houses in New York, Boston and Albany to help children with neuroblastoma, the third most common form of pediatric cancer.

The foundation recently received a surprise, unsolicited donation of \$100,000 from Scotland. It came from J.K. Rowling.

The gift spurred Catie's mom to make public the story of her daughter's special relationship with the best-selling author.

"Jo's kindness and generosity brings a lot of awareness to pediatric cancer and Catie's foundation," Gina Peca said. "She's so genuine and down-to-earth."

Now when the family travels, the boys like to buy souvenirs. They leave the shiny trinkets at their sister's grave in Jonesville Cemetery, not far from their home. more information about the foundation, go to the Web site <http://www.catiehochfoundation.org>. next fund-raising event, the Catiebug Bowl, will be held from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. Feb. 17 at Clifton Park Bowl on Route 9.

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