

Little girl— Big Heart



With a heart as deep as the ocean she loves, young Maddie James inspires the creation of a non-profit organization to help benefit Orange County's Ocean Institute

Summer is here, and for those of us lucky enough to live in Southern California, it tends to be our favorite time of year. Although we don't experience the rough winters in the East, we still manage to complain when it is cold and rainy, and celebrate when we can once again slide into flip flops and head outside. Everything seems more beautiful here when the sun shines, from the wildflowers to the palm trees, and the light blue skies to the deep blue ocean. Summer lightens our days. And for one little girl who spent her life here in Southern California, it was the ocean filled with a Nemo-sized world underneath, that held her heart and fascinated her mind. Her name was Maddie James, and although she passed away in March, her story lives on and is woven into the fabric of the communities here. I am honored to share it with you now.

Maddie was a tow-headed blonde with bright blue eyes, and she loved sea stars. She loved hermit crabs, sea anemones, and bright colored fish, and though she had a wonderful life on land, the world she loved the most was under the sea. Knowing this, her mom Kasja and dad Collie enrolled her in the Sea Squirts Summer Camp at the Ocean Institute in the summer of 2009. Located in Dana Point, it was not far from Maddie's home in Capistrano Beach. She loved it there, and as a result of the institute's educational programs, she learned about the creatures she adored, how to interact with them, and about the science of the ocean.

continued



*"There are no seven wonders of the world.
In the eyes of a child, there are seven million."*

– Walt Streightiff



Seaside Learning Center at the Ocean Institute

Over time, she became friends with Dan Stetson, the Institute's President and CEO, along with the teachers, staff and volunteers. As Dan remembers fondly, Maddie would save her name tags from each day at camp and often tell him that the institute was her favorite place in the whole world. Maddie continued to visit the institute after summer's end, and the ocean remained her favorite topic to discuss with family members, teachers and friends.

Maddie's love of the ocean grew, and although her life was cut tragically short by an inoperable brain tumor that took her life on March 13th, 2011—only 52 days after she was diagnosed—her love for the Ocean Institute stayed strong even in her final days. On March 4th, barely ten days before she passed away, Dan arranged for the institute to bring the ocean to her by creating a touch pool, placing it on wheels, and bringing it to her bedside. She loved it, and while barely awake, she managed to extend her two little fingers—like she'd been taught at summer camp—to feel the creatures one last time, and call out each of their names. It was truly a special moment for everyone in the room. Before Dan left, Maddie extended both hands and handed him five \$100 bills, a prize her family had won in the OC Register for "best Hawaii photo." Maddie's mom and dad said if they won, Maddie could give the money to the Ocean Institute to help with their big construction project, and tears streamed down their faces when Maddie gave those bills to Dan, telling him the money was to "build it."

Maddie was not given the length of life so many of us are blessed to have, but those who knew her say that if she were, it would have been dedicated to the ocean. Therefore, in her honor, and to create a

legacy for their daughter, Kasja and Collie have launched the Maddie James Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to raising funds to benefit Maddie's favorite place—the Ocean Institute. In a few very short months, the foundation has successfully raised over \$300,000 toward their goal of \$1 million, and has earmarked 100% of these funds to help "build it." "It" is the Ocean Institute's largest capital project, a \$4 million Seaside Learning Center, designed to be an education center for children like Maddie who are fascinated by life under the sea.

As a mom of three young children also entranced by the world under the waves, I love the Ocean Institute and its extraordinary programs that educate our youth on how to understand and respect the ocean. It is a wonderful place here in Southern California: locally based, but nationally renowned, operated well, and with a strong and viable mission. If you are looking for somewhere to bring your family this summer, or a place to donate funds that will be used to educate over 115,000 youth per year, it is a truly deserving organization.

As Maddie learned during her short life, the Ocean Institute is a special place with a big heart. And you never know—it could someday become one of your favorite places in the whole world.

For more information on the Ocean Institute, or on the Maddie James Foundation to benefit the Seaside Learning Project, visit Ocean-Institute.org.