

BIKE: Determined dad creates joy for son

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around his neck, his brain was starved of oxygen for a few vital seconds, seconds whose impact would last every day of the rest of his life.

“Being a parent,” says Topal, pulling a taupe thread through the turned-up sleeve of a suit jacket he was altering in the window of his shop, “and a doctor telling you your kid might not walk or talk, it makes you so much worry.

“Any improvement he makes, I feel like I won a lottery.

“The first time when he called my name, Figo, he was 5½ years old and I thought I was the luckiest father on the Earth. I was so happy. I cried.

“The second time he talked, he said, ‘Daddy, love you.’ He was 7 years old.”

Topal looks up from the needle and thread. His face is not bitter or sad or beaten.

“From the schools and the doctors, they tell us his motor skills and speech, they rate him 29 months to 36 months, so he’s like 2½, 3 years old. But as a father, I know my son very good. If we can give him more chance, patience and love. It’s all about patience and love and opportunity.”

Ten years ago, Topal had another dream for his son. He couldn’t yet stand, but Topal wanted him to walk. The doctors had said it would never happen; Topal didn’t listen. For three years, every single day, Topal took Devrim by the hands. He held a rolled-up sheet taut around the boy’s chest and under his armpits, clutching it in back, much like a harness. Then he walked behind him, pressing the front of his legs against the back of Devrim’s.

They would walk like this, father literally propelling son, down the block from Topal’s dry-cleaning shop at the corner of Southport and Fletcher, to the corner of Fletcher and Greenview, and back again.

“It would take me two hours every day. Seven days a week. Rainy, shiny, hot, cold,” Topal said, looking back at his thread. “The first two years, no re-



After riding his bike up and down the sidewalk near his father’s dry-cleaning business, 12-year-old Devrim Topal gets a hand from his dad, Figo, in putting the bike away.

Tribune photo by David Klobucar

sponse. I didn’t see from him any attempt. All of a sudden one day he stepped by himself. My leg, I was late. I was thinking something else. I thought, ‘My God, is this real?’ That gave me so much hope.

“Before that, those two years, I had like 100 reasons why I should stop. I was behind in my work. My friends, they were accusing me that I was chasing a

rainbow.”

Devrim still cannot raise his leg enough to climb a curb by himself. With his dad holding him and the bike steady, he lifts his foot three or four times before he’s able to swing it up and over the bicycle bar. Once on the seat, he keeps his eyes glued to the concrete beneath him. “Daddy, scared,” he says, barely audibly.

But then, knees akimbo, the boy on the bike gets a push, ever so softly, from his papa. Tongue protrudes between teeth. A grin, faint at first, spreads across his face. Father and son are smiling, almost sailing along.

“Happy,” says Devrim. “Very happy?” asks his father. “Happy,” says the son, unswerving.

DEAR PHARMACIST Programs ease expense of prescriptions

By Suzy Cohen, R.Ph.
Tribune Media Services

Q My retired father is very poor, and our family is having to pay for his medication, which costs about \$400 per month. Do you have ideas to help us?

—T.L., Greensboro, N.C.

A Yes, there are some good programs that offer meaningful savings without a catch.

Almost a million Americans have the Together Rx discount card. This card is free, and there are no membership dues or other hidden fees. To be eligible,

you have to be over 65, Medicare-eligible and not have a prescription benefit. So it’s OK if you have medical insurance, but you can’t have a prescription discount.

Also, it’s limited to individuals who make less than \$28,000 a year or couples who earn less than \$38,000. Assets don’t matter. Now the Together Rx program doesn’t give you free medicine. Rather, it discounts brand-name drugs up to 40 percent off the regular retail price.

Having the Together Rx card won’t ensure a discount on every single drug, but the program

boasts more than 150 brand-name drugs, including Allegra, Diovan, Flonase, Glucophage, Miacalcin, Nexium, Paxil, Synthroid and Ultram. To sign up for the card, call 800-865-7211 or visit www.Together-Rx.com.

Another excellent discount card is the Share Card. This is a free card with no hidden costs. Essentially, the Share Card allows you to get a 30-day supply of your medication for a flat fee of \$15 per month per prescription. The card is available to Medicare enrollees who make less than \$18,000 per individual or \$24,000 per couple.

You can’t get this discount card if you already have prescription drug coverage. These discount cards are to help people who are paying cash out of pocket.

Because Pfizer is the founder of this program, only Pfizer medications are covered. There are a lot of top-selling meds on the Share Card list: Diflucan, Glucotrol, Lipitor, Aricept, Neurontin, Norvasc, Procardia, Viagra, Zithromax, Zolof and Zyrtec. To sign up for this card, call 800-717-6005.

The Lilly Answers Card has the same eligibility require-

ments as the Pfizer Share Card, but patients pay a flat fee of \$12 for a 30-day supply (per prescription) of any medication made by Lilly. Controlled substances such as painkillers are not included. To enroll for the Lilly Answers card, call 877-795-4559 or visit www.lillyanswers.com.

You are probably wondering if you can qualify for more than one card at a time. Yes, you can.

An innovative, Internet-based company called RxHope.com is doing some nice things. They help doctors do the tedious paperwork required to help patients qualify for free medicine. Doctors can log on and have most of the work done for them. There’s no cost to anyone. Another excellent Web site,

www.helpingpatients.org, allows anyone to see what programs they are eligible for. It’s simple and takes less than two minutes.

Most pharmaceutical companies assist patients in true need, regardless of age. You can log on to www.freemedicineprogram.com and find out if you qualify for free medicine. You’ll be shocked to see all the drugs available for free if you qualify.

This information is not intended to treat, cure or diagnose your condition. Always consult your physician. For more information, visit www.dearpharmacist.com or write c/o Tribune Media Services, 435 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 1400, Chicago, IL 60611.

RESOURCES

Immunity boost

Bacteria and viruses always will be a threat to your health, so the best defense is to keep your immune system strong. If you tend to fight frequent colds and infections, chances are your immune system is suffering due to a low or high count of infection-fighting white blood cells, notes a detailed feature in the September issue of Consumer Reports on Health.

The problem may be nutrition deficiencies. Particularly important to your diet are the B vitamins (including folic acid), vitamins C and D, beta carotene, iron, selenium and zinc.

Vitamin supplements can help, but it’s best to eat a diet rich in whole grains, produce and low-fat dairy products.

Exercise helps the immune system, too, but not if you work out to exhaustion. Too much exercise can temporarily impair your immune function, as can chronic stress.

Try to keep a positive attitude, and work out tension with relaxation training and massage.

Here are four more ways to boost your immune system: Get enough sleep, ideally seven to eight hours a night. Avoid excessive sun, which can suppress the immune system. Reduce your exposure to pesticides and mercury by thoroughly washing fruits and vegetables and avoiding fish with high mercury levels, such as shark, swordfish and king mackerel. Finally, use antibiotics only when absolutely necessary.



AP photo

School vending machines may be one of the best places to start attacking youth obesity.

Overweight kids

Kids are fatter than ever, and some blame schools that offer poor lunch choices and too many products with empty calories in vending machines. Rather than wait for the government to act, why not gather other parents and ask your schools to make the innovative changes successfully implemented elsewhere?

A story in the September issue of Cooking Light offers several ideas. In California, one school district is letting students select from 8 to 11 fruit and vegetable options. When the kids are allowed to make their own choices, they often try new,

healthier foods.

In Florida, a food-service program delivers salads, whole fruits and fresh-fruit cups to the kids daily.

And New York City’s education department has decided to ban from schools all unhealthy, high-fat vending machine items.

At home, parents can help by encouraging their kids to cut 100 calories of food daily and to add daily physical activity.

Insurance scams

With the rising cost of health insurance, many people are looking for low-cost deals to help pay medical costs. But watch out for scams, warns Hal

Morris, a Las Vegas-based consumer affairs journalist, speaking in the September issue of Bottom Line Tomorrow.

Be suspicious, he says, if health coverage is at rock-bottom rates, if the company offers “benefits” rather than “insurance” and if no medical exams or questionnaires are required. Red flags should go up if the agent seems too eager to sign you up and if he doesn’t have specific answers to your questions.

To determine whether a company is legit, call your state insurance department to see if the agent and firm are state licensed. In Illinois, health insurance and HMO inquiries can be made toll-free to the Office of Consumer Health Insurance at 877-527-9431.

A woman’s heart

A national campaign called Heart Truth is urging women ages 40 to 60 to build their awareness of heart disease. Women need to take the risk seriously because 1 in 3 women dies of heart disease, and it also can lead to disability and a declining quality of life.

For tools and resource links on lowering heart disease risk, head to the Heart Truth Web site created by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, www.nhlbi.nih.gov/heart/hearttruth. There’s information on lowering high blood pressure, cholesterol and obesity as well as a risk-assessment quiz and healthy recipes.

—Verna Noel Jones

On a mission, no hurdle’s too high

It was an exercise in stubborn optimism that cost him a spat with his wife, three days of searching store after superstore for just the right bike, \$139 for the bike, \$10 for a supersized axle sturdy enough to hold supersized training wheels, nearly an hour of pleading with a bike shop mechanic who swore it couldn’t be done, and \$150 to get him to do it.

But in the end, Figo Topal got the training wheels rigged onto a big-kid bike, and his 12-year-old son, Devrim, got the ride of his dreams.

Devrim was born with his umbilical cord tight around his neck and so he’s developmentally somewhere around 2½ or 3 years old.

All summer long, in fact all summer long for the last three years, Devrim has been pleading: “Daddy, wanna bike.”

When he was 7, he had a bike, but he outgrew it before he learned how to ride. Then his father bought one of those kid bikes that attach to the back of a grownup’s bike.

But that felt kind of scary to Devrim, to be way back there alone. Besides, he could ride only when his dad was around to ride, and Topal works six days a week, 12 hours a day, at least, at his dry-cleaning shop at 3134 N. Southport Ave.

This summer one of Topal’s customers told him about a Web site where he could find bikes for kids with special needs. Indeed, Topal and his wife, Emine, spotted a lovely three-wheeler for adults that came with a price tag of \$1,425.

It wasn’t just the money that gave Topal pause.

“I was almost going to buy that. But I was thinking, ‘If I buy that, he will never learn how to ride a bike. It has three wheels, he’ll get used to that.’ I didn’t want that. I wanted him to learn to balance.”

But Topal’s wife had her heart set on the three-wheeler. She came home one day and mentioned that she’d just seen one at a bike shop called Cycle Smithy, in Lincoln

Park.

Topal, no fool when it comes to domestic peacekeeping (Emine had accused him of holding the purse strings too tight), stopped by to check it out. It turned out he knew the guy selling bikes, the boyfriend of one of his customers. Topal knew him only as Tall Mike.

In fact, he’s Mike Nelson, and he has worked there nearly 30 years.

Topal laid out his plight. Nelson told him they could customize a big-kid bike with a heavy-duty axle that could hold training wheels sturdy enough for 100-plus pounds. He said the bikes at his shop were too expensive and too fancy for what he needed, so he pointed Topal out the door with orders to find a bike without too many speeds (they would have to lock the gears to only one speed, or the special axle wouldn’t work).

For three days, Topal and son searched. Finally they walked into Target and walked out with a 20-inch, six-speed, silver-with-blue bike (Devrim insists that boys’ bikes must be blue).

Devrim was happy. He gave his father a kiss. He went to sleep smiling.

But when Topal rolled the bike into the shop, Nelson took one look at it and gulped. He was afraid it wouldn’t work—six speeds was too many. So was the mechanic, who shook his head, no way. Nelson asked how much he would pay to have it done. Topal said that even if it was a million dollars, he wanted it done.

It cost \$160, all told.

By the next Sunday morning, at nearly the crack of dawn, Devrim, his father, his mother and his 4-year-old sister, Evrim, were standing with the bike in a park alongside the Chicago River, at Foster Avenue.

It took five minutes for Devrim to get his leg up and over the bicycle bar.

The training wheels took it from there.

—Barbara Mahany

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