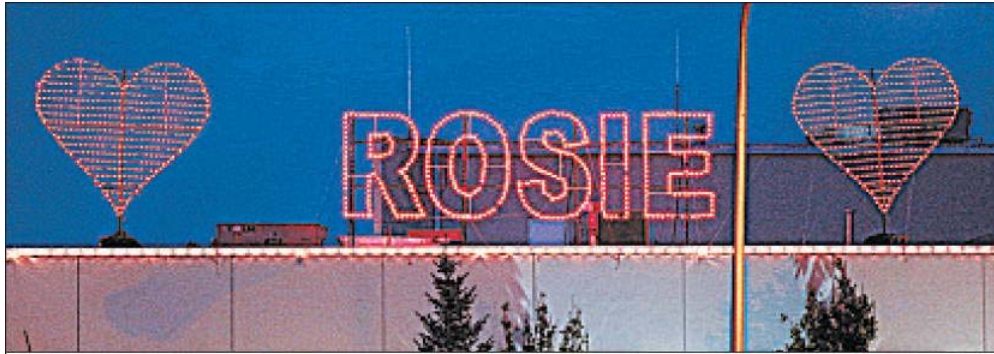


On Kennedy, a sign of hope

Company puts on big display to brighten the spirits of an ailing girl

BY COLLEEN MASTONY TRIBUNE REPORTER



JOHN J. KIM/TRIBUNE PHOTO The sign over the Kennedy Expressway "is not just a sign," Rosie's mom, JoAnne Colucci, said. "It's hope."

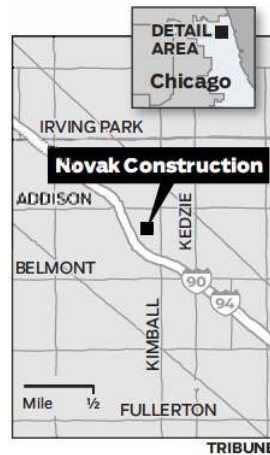


STACEY WESCOTT/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Rosie Colucci of Palatine is battling inoperable brain tumors.



STACEY WESCOTT/TRIBUNE PHOTO Mike Marschalk, of Novak Construction, and JoAnne Colucci hold the giant letter "R" as Rosie Colucci beams at the letter her name in lights.



Over a bleak stretch of the Kennedy Expressway that is often jammed with soul-crushing traffic, the enormous holiday light displays burst through the rush-hour malaise. At Easter, a 12-foot pink bunny, flanked by eggs and flowers, waves cheerily at bleary-eyed commuters. On St. Patrick's Day, towering green shamrocks, a pot of gold and a rainbow float above the urban fray.

The wondrous Technicolor scenes come courtesy of a local construction company that owns a warehouse alongside the expressway, just south of the Addison Street exit, where the company founder has for years mounted the lights as, he says, “a fun little way to bring people some pleasure.”

But that lighthearted mission took on new meaning last year, after the company received an emotional letter from the mother of a little girl who was battling inoperable brain tumors. The letter explained how much then-8-year-old Rosie Colucci looked forward to seeing the lights on the trip from the family's home in Palatine to the Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago.

And so Novak Construction commissioned a new sign, flanked by two huge red hearts, that said simply “ROSIE.” Workers hoisted the hulking 300-pound, 10-foot-by-25-foot, 1,000-bulb sign, and illuminated it above the expressway as a symbol of courage and survival.

On Saturday, Rosie will turn 10, a milestone that many wondered if she would ever reach. And, once again, her name is shining above the Kennedy.

Most of the 260,000 drivers who zoom past on a typical weekday likely don't realize the significance of the sign. “People are like, ‘Who's Rosie?’” said John Novak, 61, founder of Novak Construction.

“Then I tell them the story. I tell them there is a pretty sick little girl and we put it up for her.”

The megawatt gesture has meant a lot to the Colucci family.

“It gives me a lot of strength, just knowing people care and that they're praying for her and they stand behind us in our fight,” said Rosie's mom, JoAnne Colucci, 50.

“The sign is not just a sign,” she said. “It's hope.”

Highway fixture

For years, the Coluccis passed the holiday lights on top of the Novak building. Rosie was born with a genetic disorder called neurofibromatosis, which caused tumors in her brain and multiple other potentially life-threatening complications. Since she was an infant, she had been in and out of the hospital, as often as several times a week.

“When we first started seeing the lights, she was really little. And it was just something that lit up the night and brightened the trip to the hospital,” JoAnne Colucci recalled. “As she got older, she started pointing out the lights and she would basically just get a big smile on her face no matter whether she was sick or throwing up or had a really bad headache, or whatever. She would stop for that moment and look at those lights.”

For mother and daughter, the light displays offered a brief respite from suffering and fear.

One night in January 2013, Rosie woke up with a terrible headache. At 3 a.m., JoAnne bundled her into the car and raced to Lurie Children's. She had never seen Rosie in such pain.

As they sped down the Kennedy and rounded the curve near Addison Street, Rosie — who had been vomiting in the car — pointed out the window and called, “Mom! There’s a new sign!”

On top of the Novak building, a stark white sign glowed in the darkness: I HAVE A DREAM.

Novak had raised the sign in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

Rosie underwent emergency surgery later that morning to repair a shunt in her brain that had malfunctioned. But all through the terrifying ordeal, as Rosie was wheeled into the operating room and recovered in the ICU, the image of the sign, shining in the dark, stayed with JoAnne. A few days later, she sat down to write a letter to Novak Construction.

I have always meant to contact you, but life moves quickly and oftentimes gets complicated, but your holiday lights display has become so important to us, it holds such great meaning for our family that I just had to thank you.

The letter went on to explain Rosie’s battle against her illness, and how the lights made a trip to the hospital in the middle of the night a little less scary.

We don't know just how long Rosie will be with us, but she is making her mark on this world while she is here! Thank you for making yours! We very much appreciate NOVAK Construction! As Rosie would say, 'You Rock!'

When the letter reached Novak Construction, it circulated all around the company and brought tears to the eyes of the company founder. “This poor girl,” John Novak said. “I thought, ‘What can we really do for her?’ ” He spoke to some of his employees, who reached out to Temple Display, an Oswego-based company that has long built Novak’s light displays, and Temple agreed to make a special donation.

Then Novak invited Rosie and her family to the company headquarters for a surprise.

The Coluccis piled into the car and headed down the Kennedy — this time for a happier reason than visiting the hospital. As they rounded the curve near Addison, Rosie, her mother and sister, Bella, all looked for the first sight of the Novak building.

A huge sign came into view: > ROSIE >

“I was like, ‘No way!’ and Rosie was like, ‘It’s my name!’ We were all screaming in the car. I just couldn’t believe they did that,” recalled JoAnne Colucci.

“When we turned the corner, we were all so happy. I was like, ‘Wow!’ ” Rosie said. “I thought it was super-duper cool.”

Strong bond

In the year and a half since the ROSIE sign went up, employees at Novak have formed a tight bond with the Coluccis. They donated a vanload of gifts to a toy drive Rosie has long organized, called Rosie’s Toy Box. They shimmied alongside her at a dance marathon to raise money for Lurie Children’s. In October, they’ll tie on their sneakers and participate in a local walkathon that benefits pediatric brain tumor research.

And, of course, they continue to light the Rosie sign. Most recently, it glowed over the expressway in December when Rosie began another round of chemotherapy.

“We want her to know that we’re behind her,” John Novak said simply.

Now, Rosie is still battling. She is taking a cocktail of medications that are part of an experimental treatment to stabilize a tumor behind her eye. Her hair is still growing in after brain surgery in March. But, in most ways, she seems like a typical girl. She is outgoing, bubbly and loves arts and crafts. She is strong enough that she attended camp this summer, and she will enter fifth grade in the fall.

Doctors are optimistic that — barring any unforeseen complications — she will survive into adulthood.

“There were times when she was having emergency surgery because all of a sudden she wasn’t waking up, and we weren’t sure what was going on. She could have not made it through some of those things,” said Dr. Jason Fangusaro, Rosie’s neuro-oncologist. “Reaching her adolescence and teenage years, I really think, is a triumph.”

For JoAnne Colucci, seeing Rosie turn 10 feels like a not-so-small miracle. “I get really emotional about it. It just chokes me up,” she said. “It’s this incredible gift that she has faced so much and she’s been such a champion.”

Radiant smile

Earlier this week, as her birthday approached, the huge red hearts and letters of the ROSIE sign laid flat on the roof of the Novak building, as three men in hard hats scurried around, screwing red light bulbs into place, turning bolts and unfurling heavy-duty tension wire.

When everything was almost ready, a worker called for Rosie and handed her the sign’s electric plug. With a big smile, Rosie pushed the plug into a socket, and the sign lit up brilliantly.

“We’ve got power!” the worker called. Then — after a few faulty bulbs were swapped out — the workers eased the black steel frame up so the ROSIE sign once again stood proudly over the Kennedy.

Rosie and her family whooped and cheered. “It’s awesome!” Rosie declared. “Amazing,” said her mother.

Later that day, the family would head to Lurie Children’s for one of Rosie’s bimonthly MRIs. But in this moment, there was only the joy of seeing the sign and the gratitude of being alive to celebrate it.

On the roof, Rosie laughed as she explained that she hasn’t tired of the neon tribute. “Every time, (the sign) surprises me even more, and wows me even more,” she said. “It’s not like every day that you get to see your name in red lights.”
cmastony@tribune.com