

Long Island Now

Penelope's Odyssey holds pumpkin patch for sick kids

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Lori Schneider smiled, watching her 5-year-old daughter Penelope circle a pumpkin patch at Clark Botanic Garden in Roslyn Heights looking for the perfect one to paint.

"We are doing a pumpkin patch for children and their families that are impacted with a childhood illness like cancer," said Schneider, 35, of Sea Cliff.

In September 2010, Penelope was diagnosed with leukemia at age 3. After she received a bone marrow transplant in January 2011, her

family formed a nonprofit called Penelope's Odyssey, named after their daughter's journey battling leukemia.

On Saturday, the nonprofit held an event to offer local families with sick children a chance to pick their own pumpkin, courtesy of Hicks Nursery in Westbury, and paint them.

"Because of their immune systems being compromised, they often can't go to pumpkin patches and can't always be around overly crowded places," said Schneider, co-founder of the nonprofit. "It was something that when Penelope was going through treatment [she] really missed."

Friend of the family, Michelle Wettstein, 35, of South Hempstead, painted the children's faces and Hicks Nursery also sent Otto the Ghost to pose for pictures with the children.

Teresa Chiu brought her 3-year-old twins Zachary and Zoey to give them, especially her son who was diagnosed with leukemia in April, a chance to paint pumpkins to get into the Halloween spirit.

"It's nice that they have something like this," said Chiu, 38, of Fresh Meadows, Queens. "It's hard to find places to take them that aren't crowded and leave him open to catching germs."

Like many of the 20 children and their families, Chiu's son attended Sunrise Day Camp in Wheatley Heights, which offers recreational activities in the summer to children with cancer.