

CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL AT ST. MARY'S

Wednesday isn't an indoors day for kids enduring long stays at St. Mary's Medical Center. It's a day for playing on a sun-soaked putting green with help from local pro Ryan Alvino.

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RICHARD GRAILSLEY/Staff Photographer
Chris Neffke, 13, practices his swing as part of the PGA-affiliated Smiling Fore Life program. Chris has bone cancer.

become a big draw.

Her fellow golfers this Wednesday: her 5-year-old sister, who's been stuck in that room with her; a 13-year-old boy fighting bone cancer, who rolled up in a wheelchair trailed by a heavily laden IV pole; and another 7-year-old whose mother suspects he is suffering from childhood arthritis, and whose nurse declared him a medical mystery just that morning.

Why the crowd?

The Child Life Program at St. Mary's was looking for a new way to engage child patients who spend days or weeks in its care. Someone told director David Tkac about Smiling Fore Life, a program bringing golf pros to hospital halls.

A couple of phone calls later, the local Professional Golfers' Association, which coordinates the program, sent over golf pro Ryan Alvino. Two other local pros have signed on, but they must get their shots and volunteer training before they head for the green. St. Mary's is the second South Florida hospital to tap the program for its patients — Joe DiMaggio's Children's Hospital in Broward is the other.

The golf lessons, which began at St. Mary's about a month ago, run for a couple of

WEST PALM BEACH — Clad in her pink baseball cap, princess pajama pants and yellow socks, Zaniya Mays steps up to the golf tee. The X-ray of her chest will have to wait.

She's been pent up in a room at St. Mary's Medical Center for six days. And the invitation to meet a golf pro and take a few swings at the ball — albeit a fuzzy purple one — is too hard to resist for the 7-year-old asthma sufferer.

The putting green in the middle of the valet parking loop at the Children's Hospital entrance has

hours every Wednesday.

Alvino supplies the golf clubs (unusually light and brightly colored), the balls (more like miniature tennis balls) and some clever targets (he will hold a target like a shield and move into the path of the ball if necessary to boost a kid's morale).

"My parents wish I had this equipment when I was a kid," Alvino says, fondly recalling more than a couple of broken windows on his path to becoming the head golf pro at the John Prince Golf Learning Center in suburban Lake Worth.



Alvino

Once Alvino gets Zaniya's feet pointing forward, her hands stacked properly and her club aimed at the target, the girl proves to be accurate.

On the other hand, Damonte Knight, 5, whose mom suspects a familial case of arthritis is what's causing the boy's legs to ache, is all about power.

Chris Reisfeld, 13, is the group's veteran, putting with real clubs and golf balls.

He's been in and out of the hospital for "three months, maybe four."

"I've missed one day. I didn't feel good and I had a lot of pain," Chris says.

But today he's sunk a couple of putts — which apparently isn't easy on the four-hole green that was installed when the children's hospital was opened under Jack Nicklaus' name.

"This is an incredibly difficult putting green," Alvino concedes. "It's extremely fast. It's like putting at PGA National."

Chris, however, appears grateful to get out in the sunshine.

His fallback for entertainment? "Going to the cafeteria."

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