

'Notes' about cancer's toll on family

BYLINE: Sharon Galligar Chance. For the Times Record News

NOTES LEFT BEHIND by Brooke and Keith Desserich (William Morrow, \$19.99)

Anytime a child becomes ill is rough on the parents. But when a child is diagnosed with a terminal illness, the devastation can be overwhelming.

"Notes Left Behind" is the story of one such family who fought the good fight to battle cancer, and their immense love for their daughter.

Brooke and Keith Desserich's 5-year old daughter Elena was found to have a cancerous tumor on her brain stem. Given just months to live, Elena's parents began keeping a journal of their daughter's journey as she battled the cancer. Documenting their trips to Memphis, Tenn., to pursue an experimental course of treatment, which included radiation, chemotherapy and tests, the parents tell of Elena's courage as she endured loss of mobility, speech and the ability to eat as the tumor receded and reoccurred over several months.

Meaning the journal to be a way to explain what was happening to Elena to her little sister, Gracie, the entries by both Keith and Brooke are heart-wrenchingly honest and heartbreaking as the disease begins to take its toll on the entire family.

This journal is also a tribute to a brave little girl who loved her family more than anything else in the world. Elena had good days when she was excited to go to school, to play with her sister, and to just be a little girl. There were also a lot of bad days when frustration over the lack of control over her own body left Elena depressed and moody. But through it all, her family was by her side, celebrating the good, and trying to chase away the bad as best they could.

With wisdom beyond her years, Elena's parents acknowledge that their daughter probably knew that she didn't have much time left to be with her family. As a way to show them her love, Elena drew hearts and wrote notes of love to her mom, dad and sister. After her death, these little notes were found all over the house, tucked away in books, briefcases, even in the refrigerator - all expressing Elena's love. Several of these notes are pictured throughout the book, evoking a smile in memory of a courageous girl.

While a personal diary for Gracie, the Desserich's hope that "Notes Left Behind" will also be a call for parents to love on and hug their children every day, cherishing the time spent as a family. A portion of the proceeds from the book will go to "The Cure Starts Now Foundation," set up by the Desserich's to find a cure for childhood brain cancers.