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Gardner revisits girl who gave HR bracelet



Middle Island's Alyssa Esposito, left, and Brett Gardner on Friday.

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Through the window of her hospital room in New York Presbyterian Morgan Stanley Children's Hospital, Alyssa Esposito and her mother used to look out at the bright lights of Yankee Stadium before they went to bed each night.

Alyssa, 18, needed a heart transplant. The two lived in the hospital's intensive care unit for 107 days while waiting for an organ to be donated. "I would think sports and fun," said her mother, Laura. "It was a whole different world from the one of sick kids in the hospital."

The two worlds collided when Yankees outfielder Brett Gardner came to visit the hospital May 15. Whether it be fate, coincidence or karma, the meeting brought incredible luck to both a baseball player who needed a hit and a girl from Middle Island who needed a heart.

During the visit, Esposito gave Gardner a Project Sunshine bracelet and predicted he would hit a home run if he wore it. That night, Gardner hit the first inside-the-park homer at the new Yankee Stadium. The outfielder entered that game with one home run in 202 major-league at-bats.

At about the same time that night, Alyssa was told that a donor had been found. The next day, she had a heart transplant.

"The whole thing is a pretty crazy story," said Gardner, who was reunited with Alyssa on Friday at a news conference at the hospital. "I didn't want to say anything when she gave it to me, but I'm not really a home run hitter."

Gardner told a few reporters about the bracelet after hitting the Yankees' first inside-the-parker since Ricky Ledee on Aug. 29, 1999. The family found

out about the home run during the surgery and was able to get a tape of it. When she awoke from the surgery and her breathing tube was removed, the family played it for her.

"He's running for me," Alyssa proudly declared.

The home run helped give the Yankees a 5-4 win over Minnesota, the third victory in a nine-game winning streak. Entering Friday night, the Yankees had gone 17-9 since Alyssa and Gardner's meeting. "Everyone thinks it's Alex Rodriguez, but it's really Alyssa," her father, Tony, said with a laugh.

Gardner had been visiting the hospital as a volunteer for Project Sunshine, a not-for-profit organization that brings celebrities and other volunteers to children's hospitals across the country.

"I just came here with the intention of meeting a few children and trying to put a smile on their face," Gardner said. "When I met Alyssa, I didn't know what she was going through. Then later, I found out about the surgery."

Despite weather-related problems traveling back to New York from Boston on Thursday night that prevented Gardner from getting home until 4 a.m. Friday, he clearly was thrilled to be visiting again with Alyssa. Gardner invited her to be his guest at a Yankees game later this season.

"It's great to see she's doing so well," Gardner said.

Alyssa, who also had a bone-marrow transplant at 14 months old, is now back home with her family in Middle Island. They spend nights watching the Yankees on television together, which is much nicer than looking out at the lights of the stadium from a hospital window. Said Laura: "I think there is a special connection there."