

'Cameron is my inspiration ...he's a star'

Coronation Street's Tupele Dorgu tells MAXINE CLAYMAN how one remarkable little boy has deeply touched her heart

On edge, fidgeting and uneasy, young Cameron Small glances at the door of the studio as he prepares for his photo shoot. When his heroine Tupele arrives, his fears vanish immediately.

The young campaigner giggles with delight as the Coronation Street actress gives him a cuddle, then kneels to look him in the eye and ask if he's okay.

It's a touching moment and the affection between the pair is obvious, as they laugh and joke while posing for pictures, clearly loving every minute. Their lives couldn't be more different, Preston-born Tupele Dorgu, 30, is famous for playing factory girl Kelly in Coronation Street, while 10-year-old Cameron Small, of Grim-sargh, suffers from autoimmune haemolytic anaemia, a life-threatening condition that affects his immune system.

Yet Cameron and Tupele have formed a bond through their dedication to raising money for a children's hospital in Manchester.

The New Children's Hospital Appeal hopes to raise £20 million for state-of-the-art facilities and vital life-saving equipment in a new £400-million hospital development. The appeal's emphasis is on accommodation for parents of sick children receiving inpatient treatment and Tupele is its patron. Cameron and his family have already raised a staggering £78,000 through fund-raising events, including a sponsored bungee jump.

Ruffling his hair, Tupele says: "Cameron is amazing. Despite everything he's been through, and the illness he still suffers from, he is so brave. He told me when we first met that he enjoys raising money because he wants to make other sick children happy too.

"He's such an inspiration to me. Although he's poorly, he's always got a big smile on his face. We met through our work with this charity but we've become friends and I'm full of admiration for his parents,

Andy and Diane; they're amazing people.

"Caring for a sick child must be the most difficult thing in the world. The worry and fear must be debilitating. The way Cameron and his family deal with what life's thrown at them is so humbling."

When Tupele was asked to be a patron of the charity, she didn't hesitate. In a cruel irony her boyfriend's nephew, Connor, was diagnosed with leukaemia at the same time.

"I've seen how much a child's illness can affect the whole family. Connor is five now but he was just three when he was diagnosed.

"Thankfully he had treatment and recovered, although he'll need regular check-ups until he's 18. He's an incredible little boy and has now started school.

"I've seen first-hand how his parents have coped and how they have had to remain strong for their child's sake.

"That's why this charity is so important to me. Parents need to be able to get a good night's sleep – and often just be given some space, where they can go off and cry in private.

"I hope to have children of my own, so when I see these parents working so hard to keep the family unit together, it makes me wonder how I would cope in that situation."

Former Kirkham Grammar school pupil Tupele lives in Manchester with her boyfriend, 39-year-old businessman Mark Flanagan. They've been together for three years.



GREAT FRIENDS: Tupele Dorgu with Cameron Small and his mum Diane

bringing in Preston. "We were the only mixed-race family in our street – my mum is half English, half Irish, and my dad

is Nigerian. But despite our backgrounds there was never any animosity towards my family.

"Of course there was the odd comment. I remember lots of the kids in my class thought my dad was Jamaican and assumed that all we ate was chicken, rice and peas, which was quite funny. But if anything, growing up being different from everyone else gave me a greater sense of awareness in a positive way.

"Before landing a part in Coronation Street I appeared in musicals in the West End. I was trained as a dancer and I left home at 18 to go London and try to break into the industry.

"I'm lucky that I had such supportive

parents while I was growing up and thanks to them I do realise how important it is to have a stable family life, which is why I feel so inspired by Cameron and his wonderful parents," says Tupele.

Cameron has been listening intently to Tupele as we chat, clearly enjoying being in her company and loving every minute of the photo shoot. "Tupele is really brilliant," he grins, "my mates can't believe I'm friends with a famous person. She's really cool – and pretty too!"

● **To make a donation visit** www.newchildrenshospitalappeal.org.uk.

Pictures: IAIN PHILPOTT

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