

Building a Supportive Community One Family at a Time

"It shook my whole world for a full nine months. Nothing about me could accept it and get over it. Somehow, I didn't ever know that children had cancer. I didn't feel like my son would survive this."

Melissa Gess admits her tears flow freely today as she recalls the devastation of her son's cancer diagnosis. Charlie was one year old when they heard "neuroblastoma"—a cancer that forms in certain types of nerve tissue. Melissa remembers, "The only person I wanted to talk to was a cousin who had a little girl with spina bifida. It just eased my heart to talk to someone who could totally get having their child's life on the line."

Melissa describes how helpless she felt as the treatment took a toll on Charlie's body. He was skinny and sickly. She wrestled with the uncertainty that, "Day-to-day, we don't know what's going to happen."

It's been over 11 years since Charlie was diagnosed. Today Melissa dwells in a place of gratitude much more than fear. But she has deep compassion for others who are fearful; she recognizes it almost instinctively. At a chance—or perhaps providential—

encounter, she saw much of herself in the eyes of another mom.

Mark and Jenny Nickell were excited about the HopeKids party and bowling event. Since their son Drew was diagnosed with neuroblastoma this past June, they hadn't been out much, and bowling happened to be a favorite activity. Mark describes how a casual conversation with Josh Taylor, HopeKids president, led to meeting the Gess family. "I must have shaken Brandon's hand 15 times," Mark said. Brandon is Charlie's dad.

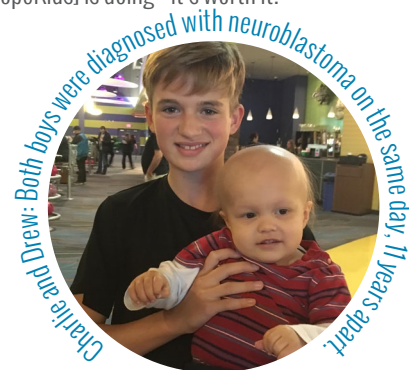
"I looked at Charlie's parents and siblings, and I could tell that they had been through something," Mark says. "And when we talked to the family—just the look on Melissa's face, she could tell that [we] were in pain. But in her face we also saw hope, and sincerity, and [a belief] that we can [get through Drew's cancer]."

Both Melissa and Jenny used the same word about their meeting: "Chills". Jenny describes the tremendous hope of hearing how well Charlie has managed since his treatment. The story got more chilling when they discovered that Charlie and Drew were both just barely a year old when they shared the

same diagnosis date of June 2nd, 11 years apart. And then the moment came when someone suggested Charlie hold Drew for a photo. Jenny and Mark tried to warn everyone that it probably wouldn't go well. Being poked and prodded through treatment has made Drew much more anxious. To Mark's astonishment, "For some reason Drew liked being held by Charlie. It was so amazing."

"Just to know that they're there, and to know that we got connected through HopeKids is just really special," Jenny says. "I hope that someday we are someone else's inspiration."

Mark adds, "I think that if this sort of thing can happen for one or two families, everything that [HopeKids] is doing—it's worth it."



- Academy Dance Studio
- American Woodmark Foundation
- Apco Theatre
- Arizona Coyotes
- Arizona Diamondbacks
- Arizona State University Men's Hockey
- Arizona State Fair
- Arizona State University Women's Basketball
- AquaSafe Swim School
- Ballet Arizona
- BARD
- Celestial Nights
- Christ Greenfield Church & School
- Cindy Joiner Photography
- Colten Cowell Foundation
- CorePower Yoga
- Children's Museum of Phoenix
- Children's Museum of Tucson
- Clydesdale Manhattan
- Dan Emery

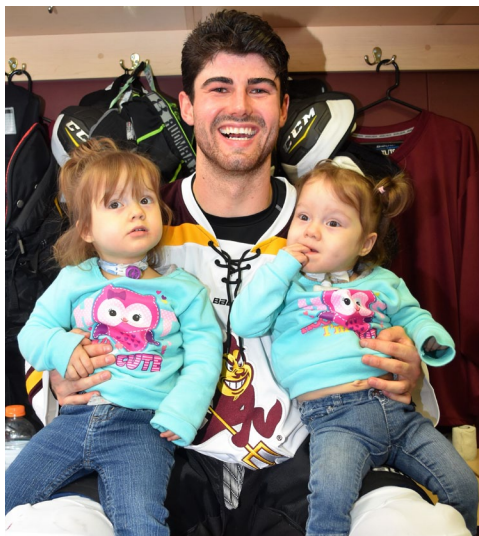
- East Valley Children's Theatre
- Executive Council Charities
- Feed My Starving Children
- Fry's Foods
- Gerber Injury Law
- General Mills
- Harvest Compassion Center
- i.d.e.a. Museum
- Inventure Foods
- LaMar Advertising
- Lassen Family
- Live Nation
- Mesa Community College Performing Arts
- Musical Theatre of Anthem
- Notre Dame Preparatory High School
- Nelson Garrison
- OdySea Aquarium
- Pegasus Airpark
- Phoenix Mercury
- Phoenix Suns

- PruGen Pharmaceuticals
- Rainy Partners
- Reid Park Zoo
- Renaissance Hotel
- Rhonda & Nenos-Build Event
- Scott Bates Photography
- Scott and Lucy Gore
- Southwest Wildlife Conservation Center
- Steve and Barbara Smith
- Spotlight Youth Theatre
- Skin Addict
- Sky Zone
- Stand Up Live
- Tempe Improv
- Tim and Susan Reckell
- Tim and Willy Kids FUN-dation
- Bob W Photography
- UltraStar Multi-tainment Center
- Valley Youth Theatre

ARIZONA HOPE DAY PROGRAM



HopeKid Tanner, age 8, builds a Hope Chest; HopeKid Lily and sister Zoey, age 2, enjoy dropping the puck at the ASU hockey game; HopeKid Jovani, age 5, and sister Jariana meet Santa on The Polar Express; HopeKid Lily, age 5, receives her medal at the HopeWalk; HopeKid Ruby, age 5, enjoys Sky Zone; HopeKid Isaac and mom enjoy a flight at Pegasus Airpark.



WHAT IS YOUR CHRISTMAS WISH?

"My Christmas wish is for treatment options for Mito depletion."

"For my child to have a pain-free day."

"For Tanner to not be confined to a wheelchair his entire life. Praying he continues to get stronger and can walk on his own: run, jump and play!!"

"To watch my son grow up."

"For a cure for porphyria so my son can feel the sun and lights without excruciating pain."

"For 22q11.2 micro deletion syndrome to not define my child."

"My wish is that my daughter gets to spend every Christmas with us until I'm no longer on this earth. I want to see her grow into a young woman, mother and wife!"

"For doctors and scientists to somehow find a way to regenerate and repair damaged nerves so that my Jazmyne can walk on her own."

"For one day doctors to be able cure genetic diseases before they affect the child."

"For people to be more accepting of others with disabilities."

"To see my son, McKenzie, enjoy life pain-free; for him to enjoy his first meal; to watch him take his first step; to hear his first words; but those are only wishes. I want my son to enjoy and explore his senses. To feel, hear, see, touch and began to taste. I wish for my Auggie to enjoy his childhood. As an older brother to a medically-fragile child, his life has been hurry up and go, as well. My wish is for all the sick kids to enjoy just one day pain-free and illness-free!"

"For Matthew and all the kids to be pain- and disease-free. No children should be fighting or living like our babies do."

"For a smooth, non-eventful, successful surgery as my husband donates a kidney to our son in a couple months. For quick and complete healing and for technology to advance to where my son will never need another transplant because this one will last him a lifetime."

"For my pixie to stop throwing up EVERY day."

"For Robin to no longer have daily fevers, a new immune system and our kids to be completely healed."

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