



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.

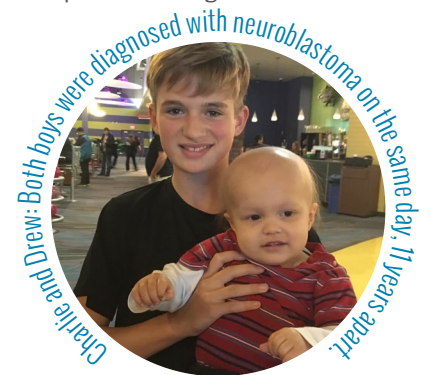
“I looked at Charlie’s parents and siblings, and I could tell that they had been through something,” Mark says. “And when we talked to the family—just the look on Melissa’s face, she could tell that [we] were in pain. But in her face we also saw hope, and sincerity, and [a belief] that we can [get through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



- Pediatric Home Service
- Children’s Theatre Company
- Minnesota Wild
- Sever’s Corn Maze
- Primrose Schools
- Minnesota Lynx
- Minnesota Timberwolves
- Hennepin Theatre Trust

- Game Day Memories
- Northrop
- Belong Tour
- Sky Zone
- Dodge Nature Center
- KTIS
- PINZ

- North High School
- Valley Christian Church
- Stages Theatre Company
- Sky Deck at Mall of America
- Tommy Bahama
- Minnesota Gophers
- Vertical Endeavors
- St. Croix Ballet

MINNESOTA HOPE DAY PROGRAM

HopeKids Jaydan, age 6, and Jacob, age 4, with their mom and brother at Cookies with Santa at the Sky Deck at Mall of America; HopeKid Maddie and her mom enjoy The Belong Tour from the HopeSuite at the Xcel Energy Center; HopeKids families explore Sever's Corn Maze; HopeKids sibling, Will, at the fall festival presented by Pediatric Home Service; HopeKid Nathan, age 8, cheers on the Minnesota Wild with his family in the HopeSuite; HopeKids Moms Night Out HopeCommunity program at Paint & Pallet in Ramsey.



WHAT IS YOUR CHRISTMAS WISH?

"My wish is to be able to provide the best quality of life for my daughter with a rare genetic disorder."

"I pray for understanding and acceptance of our children who are fighting medical and psychological disorders."

"My daughter's wish is for all the kids who have cancer or illness that they can be home with their families for the holidays."

"Continued cancer-free diagnosis for my son."

"I wish for all people with differences, facial or otherwise, to be treated with kindness."

"I wish for a cure for Sanfilippo syndrome, in time to save my son's life."

"Peace for all of the HopeKids kids and families this holiday season to feel the presence of God as we walk through hard times and some days celebrate joyous news too."

"I want no more children to die as children."

"My wish is for Natalie to have beaten cancer for a 2nd time and that it never comes back ever."

"Cure for all diseases."

"I wish for all of our children to feel peace and comfort and joy in the form of sustained health, ample space, and lots of love. For parents and siblings I wish for sustained peace free of worry and stress."

"No kiddos going through the trials our kids face."

"My wish is to find a better quality of life for my daughter. Find out answers to all of her pain/discomfort/anxiety/incontinence, the rare disorders, etc. We are tired and burned out from all the ER visits, hospital stays and doc appts that result in very little answers. My wish is for inner happiness, peacefulness, unconditional love and financial stability for everyone."

"My wish would be for our children to spend a day feeling the love, joy, and hope that is Christmas - free from the burdens of their diseases."

"I wish for all us medical parents to have one night a week for a year of uninterrupted, peaceful sleep!"

"My wish...an end to judgment. No judgment from others on how we parent our children, on the care we receive, the choices we make, on how disabled my child "looks", on behaviors, on financial conditions, on how tired we are, on why we need to cancel plans, on our lives."

"For kids to be kids!"

"For my daughter to have and understand true friendship. For me to understand this pace we are at is unique and should not be compared to other races. To dream. To hold hope like a blanket. To love all her parts even the ones I hate because they are a part of her and I love every hair of her."