



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.

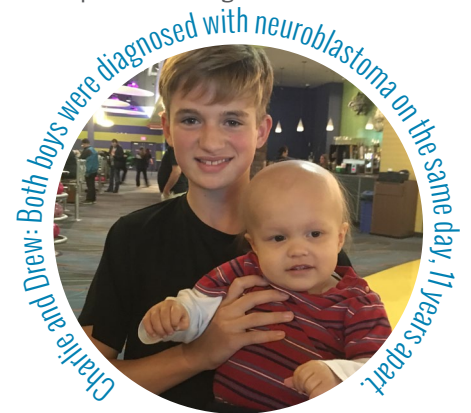
“I looked at Charlie’s parents and siblings, and I could tell that they had been through something,” Mark says. “And when we talked to the family—just the look on Melissa’s face, she could tell that [we] were in pain. But in her face we also saw hope, and sincerity, and [a belief] that we can [get through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



- Dallas Stars Foundation
- Taste Buds Kitchen Southlake
- TopGolf The Colony
- Dallas Children’s Theater
- Allied Integrated Marketing
- TopGolf Allen
- Building Smiles Foundation
- Texans Credit Union
- Dallas Mavericks Foundation
- AT&T Performing Arts Center
- Alamo Drafthouse Cinema
- LifeStage Theater at LifeSong Studio
- Arlington Parks and Recreation
- RDO Equipment Company
- KidMania
- Dance Institute of Dallas
- American Airlines Center
- CAE, Inc.
- Helping on Horseback
- Noah’s Event Venue
- Texas Legends

NORTH TEXAS HOPE DAY PROGRAM

“Chefs for the Day” Connor, Austin, and Harmony prepare food at Taste Buds Kitchen for the *Roaring Twenties* gala: Super heroes, princesses, mascots, and the Dallas Cowboys Rhythm and Blues Dancers pose at the HopeWalk: HopeKid Blaise trick or treats with Tiffany Chisnall, COO of Texans Credit Union: HopeKid Wesley meets that cast at *Elf Jr.* at Artisan Center Theater: Board Member and volunteer Steve explores the NASCAR event with the Smith family: HopeKid Jelani at “Helping on Horseback.”



WHAT IS YOUR CHRISTMAS WISH?

“We would love a cure for NF!”

“Our greatest wish is that Jonathan and his siblings have happiness and opportunities to know love and joy and ease his suffering (if even temporarily).”

“My greatest Christmas wish is that there are no more specialists, chemo meds, medical fears or anxiety. It seems like even too much to wish for.”

“To not have the overwhelming anxiety of something happening or popping up symptom wise.”

“A cure for my guys’ (cystic fibrosis) of course!!”

“A handicap van so that loading/unloading Ruben would be safer and easier.”

“I pray for no more heart defect issues for Erin.”

“To stay out of the hospital for the holidays, a week without any doctors appointments, health issues to stabilize, and that we would get much needed answers from the NIH”

“Our Christmas miracle would be a cure for the diseases that plague our family - CVID, Lupus, and cancer.”

“A cure.”

“There would be a cure for mitochondrial disease and affordable medical equipment.”

“For Wiley to get a kidney transplant this year.”

“My wish would be for the advancement of prosthetic kidneys to decrease the need for antirejection meds.”

“No hospitalizations for Erikah in 2017!”

HopeKids North Texas
P.O. Box 1628
Keller, TX 76244

Phone: 817.739.8123
Fax: 888.418.3980
bridget@hopekids.org

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