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Denni Ferrara
Leads the
Charge Against
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Natalia and
Denni Ferrara
of Middletown.



cancer crusade

When a friend's infant son was diagnosed with a life-threatening disease, Denni Ferrara could not sit by idly. Today, her foundation raises millions for leukemia research. And you'd better believe it's personal.

By Mark Nardone

Denni Ferrara met Chris Meyer in Lamaze class 20 years ago. Meyer was toxemic and miserable and, she says, in little humor to talk. Ferrara, Meyer says, "was this cute little pregnant girl with nothing but a belly, looking perfect. She just walked up and said, 'How are you?' I thought, 'Great, on top of it all, she has to be nice.'"

Ferrara and Meyer became instant friends. Meyer's son Bradley was born six weeks before Ferrara's daughter Natalia in 1994. The women strolled the babies together. Their families vacationed together. "When we could go out to dinner, we went with the Ferraras," Meyer says. "We just clicked."

The two talked constantly about the growth and development of the kids. Then Bradley, at six months old, developed what was believed to be oral thrush. When medication failed to relieve it, he was X-rayed. "High-risk stage IV neuroblastoma weren't words I'd ever heard before," Meyer says.

Neuroblastoma is a type of cancer that starts in early forms of some nerve cells in an embryo or fetus. "I'd never known anyone with cancer," Meyer says. "When they told me I was going to speak with an oncologist, I didn't even know what an oncologist was."

Doctors immediately removed a tumor from Bradley's spinal chord. After dosing the infant with chemotherapy for six months, they removed the original tumor in his stomach. Bradley

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Natalia and
Denni Ferrara.

received another six months of chemo.

Ferrara stood by Meyer through it all. She studied the issue. She tried to comfort her friend. But she felt compelled to do more.

At the time, she and her husband, Nick, were launching Frightland, the popular Halloween attraction on their sprawling farm near the St. Georges Bridge. After Frightland's first season in 1997, Ferrara donated \$10,000 of the profits to the American Cancer Society. Since then, she and Meyer started their own nonprofit, the all-volunteer Leukemia Research Foundation of Delaware, with the hope of ending childhood cancer. It has become her life's work. And little wonder.

Soon after Bradley finished treatment, Ferrara began to notice changes in Natalia. Doctors explained her withdrawal and lethargy as the result of a virus or some minor malady. Then Natalia woke one morning with one side of her face paralyzed. Doctors said the palsy was minor and would

improve in three weeks or three months, and, as predicted, the condition resolved quickly. But Natalia's lethargy continued, and her belly had begun to swell. Doctors tested for Lyme disease, but a subsequent X-ray revealed pneumonia and enlarged internal organs.

When the Ferraras returned to the

"For as small as we are, I feel like we've done some pretty big things," Ferrara says.

hospital the next day to consult with the physicians, they were directed immediately to the third floor. "I already knew that was the oncology floor," Ferrara says. The doctors tried to be as positive as they could about the diagnosis: leukemia. Natalia was 3 1/2 years old.

There are several types of leukemia, but all are cancers of the body's blood-forming tissues, including the bone marrow and the lymphatic system. Doctors at Nemours/A.I. duPont Hospital for Children sent Natalia

immediately to intensive care to drain her lungs and regulate her blood pressure.

They soon discovered cancer in all of Natalia's internal organs. Because they feared it might also be in her nervous system, they began the most aggressive treatment possible—15 days of cranial radiation followed by 2 1/2 years of chemotherapy.

For that time, "I was with Natalia for every minute of every hour of every day," Ferrara says. She also became a liaison of sorts for families with similar issues. In 2001, she joined

the board of the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society's Delaware chapter, eventually becoming president. By the time she resigned in 2006, she had grown the organization's budget from \$300,000 to \$1 million a year.

Yet, Ferrara wanted to make a more direct impact. Encouraged by her husband and Meyer, she established the Leukemia Research Foundation of Delaware in 2007 to raise money—and to ensure that 100 percent of it went to research.

"She's got a very strong passion," says



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board member Donald Yanick of Greenville, a 12-year survivor of the blood cancer multiple myeloma. "She has been very strong in making sure we meet our commitments. And she's always thinking up new ways to make money—like the mud run. That idea was a little crazy, but she was the first to say, 'Let's try it.'"

In September, Frightland hosted the sixth annual Delaware Mud Run, where 700-plus teams of four slosh through three miles of boot camp-style obstacles. The event

raised more than \$300,000 in 2013, putting it over the \$1 million mark total. Later this year, LRFDE will host its seventh annual gala fundraiser in Wilmington, which has generated about \$1.5 million. All parking fees collected at Frightland every season go straight to the foundation.

To date, LRFDE has made small gifts to cancer centers at the universities of Utah and Arkansas, as well as a \$1 million donation to St. Jude's Children's Hospital. It recently made the second of two \$50,000 gifts to the

Helen F. Graham Cancer Center & Research Institute at Christiana Hospital, and it has raised \$300,000 toward a \$1 million pledge to Nemours/A.I. duPont.

"Funding from LRFDE has helped transform our program into an international leader in childhood cancer research," says Dr. E. Anders Kolb, director of the Nemours Center for Cancer and Blood Disorders. LRFDE's gift, he says, is helping Nemours host an international conference for leaders in leukemia research, and it has helped Dr. Andrew Napper's research lab identify new therapies for acute myelocytic leukemia, one of the rarest childhood cancers. LRFDE support has also helped Nemours researchers identify new genetic causes for childhood leukemias and to identify therapies that directly target the mutations.

"Denni has a huge heart. We have great admiration for her," Kolb says. "She works tirelessly with the goal of helping other children and the people who care for them. I can honestly say that Denni and the LRFDE have given us the freedom to be more progressive in our thinking about the way we tackle the challenges of childhood leukemia."

In September, Meyer's son Bradley started his freshman year at Providence College in Rhode Island. Since ending his treatments as a toddler, he has had several surgeries to correct his spine, he has suffered some hearing loss from his treatments and he has frequent dental work to counter other side effects. He is studying history with an eye toward law or education. "He really loves helping adolescent kids," Meyer says.

Natalia is the adoring 20-year-old sister of Nick Jr. (an aspiring cancer researcher), Cross and Ava. A sophomore at Neumann University in Aston, Pa., Natalia majors in early education. As a side effect of the radiation she received as a child, she has some short-term memory issues, which make learning difficult, "but she's a normal kid," Ferrara says. "She's allowed to get a cold. She's allowed to get a flu. She surprises us every day."

Ferrara is proud of LRFDE's accomplishments. "For as small as we are, I feel like we've done some pretty big things," she says.

Advances in treatment since Natalia was diagnosed in 1998 are the proof. **W/24**



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