

Moms on a Mission

BY KERRY HEALY

Their journey through childhood cancer brought them together; their mission to defeat it binds them still.

Denni Ferrara and Chris Meyer are moms on a mission to find a cure for leukemia. Together, the best friends founded The Leukemia Research Foundation of Delaware (LRFDE), an organization that helps raise awareness and funds to combat the most common form of childhood cancer.

Approximately 19 years ago, the expectant moms met at a Lamaze class.

"I struck up a conversation with Chris," Denni explains. "We started talking to each other regularly, and our families started hanging out and vacationing together."

Soon the women's newfound friendship was tested in ways they could never have imagined.

First, Chris' son, 6-month-old Bradley, was diagnosed with stage IV neuroblastoma, the most common solid tumor in infants younger than 1 year of age.

"I'll never forget that feeling when Chris told me," Denni says. "When you hear that, as a parent, it really sounds like a death sentence."

Chris was extremely grateful for the support Denni's family gave during Bradley's treatment. Little did she realize that she would soon be returning the favor. A year later, Denni's 3-year-old daughter, Natalia, was diagnosed with high-risk acute lymphoblastic leukemia.

Both children, who were treated at a local children's hospital, are doing well now. Sharing a bond few children their age can understand, Natalia, 19, and Bradley, 17, are close. Bradley even escorted Natalia to her senior prom this year.

Chris and Denni—deeply grateful that both children's lives were spared—wanted to give back. In September 2007, Denni founded LRFDE with Chris' help, and assumed the role of president. This 100-percent volunteer organization's goal is to support research that will find cures and help advance treatments with fewer side effects. LRFDE raises funds through yearly events, including a golf outing, an annual mud run and a gala, and makes grants to several research facilities, including St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

The foundation recently completed a generous grant to the leukemia research laboratory of Ching-Hon Pui, MD, St. Jude Oncology chair, and Scott Howard, MD, of International Outreach and Oncology. "We're very proud to be funding the work of Dr. Pui and Dr. Howard," Denni says.

"After doing a lot of research and visiting St. Jude, we were overwhelmed," Chris says. "We had no idea that this



Best friends Chris Meyer (at left) and Denni Ferrara have created a foundation to support research that will help find cures for leukemia and advance treatments with fewer side effects.

type of facility was out there. No other hospital can touch what St. Jude is doing right now for children."

Denni adds, "Their work really seems to have the most promise for advancing cures for leukemia."

When asked if they foresee a time when they can say "mission accomplished," Denni says, "I don't know if, in our lifetime, we'll see a cure."

Chris said she believes a cure is inevitable.

"It's just a matter of when," she says. "It is already so much better than when our kids had it, because of all the things St. Jude is doing." ●