ST. JUDE inspire

WINTER 2026

Cherished Moments

Phenix's family celebrates life's special events thanks to St. Jude

Ben's return
After pausing tennis for treatment at St. Jude, Ben is back on the court

Pioneering breakthroughs
Dr. Alberto Pappo leads pediatric solid tumor research at St. Jude

Flourishing again
St. Jude helped Yike survive leukemia and inspired her artistic side

Santa's Workshop by Dollar General

No matter the time of year, the spirit of generosity and gratitude endures at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital® – and the impact of compassionate giving lingers. At Santa's Workshop hosted by Tennessee-based Dollar General, this cherished moment between St. Jude patient Antonio and Janie Farris of Dollar General represents the essence of a partnership that has raised more than $40 million for St. Jude since 2006.

For exemplifying the company's mission of *Serving Others* through its support of St. Jude, we celebrated Dollar General as the 2024 St. Jude *Thanks and Giving*® Partner of the Year. We also celebrate all those whose support helps St. Jude give patients and families the greatest gift of all – more time together.

To begin any new year feeling optimism and hope for an increasingly polarized and fractured world is a blessing. Thankfully, at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital®, hope is in abundant supply and, when reading the stories in this issue of St. Jude Inspire, I'm filled with optimism for the future.

Anthony writes of hope as "gritty" and "tenacious." The very thing guiding his family when daughter Madeline came to St. Jude to be treated for Ewing sarcoma.

Will and Ben were 14-year-old twins separated when Ben left home to undergo treatment for the brain cancer medulloblastoma at St. Jude. Here, however, he found community.

"The people at St. Jude are the greatest group of human beings that we've ever been around as a collective," his dad, Kevin, said.

Ben was treated by Dr. Amar Gajjar, a pioneer in developing risk-adapted therapies for medulloblastoma, who led the Neuro-Oncology Division for more than two decades. His goal has been to maximize cure rates while minimizing long-term side effects to enhance patients' quality of life.

That's a goal that gives me hope.

Hope for kids today and the patients of tomorrow like Ben, who found his way back to the tennis court, and Madeline, who is a teenager now, and whose dad writes, "Hope is built into everything at St. Jude. It's this big, healing medicine they give, and it's everywhere."

It's so true: Hope is everywhere at St. Jude. And as we begin the new year, I humbly wish you and your family the very best and offer deepest gratitude – from Anthony, Ben, Madeline and everyone at ALSAC and St. Jude – for your generosity, your eternal hope and a compassion that keeps me optimistic for the year ahead.

Ike Anand
President and Chief Executive Officer, ALSAC

ST. JUDE
inspire
VOL. 8 - ISSUE 1

501 St. Jude Place • Memphis, TN 38105
800-211-7164
InspireMagazine@stjude.org

ALSAC

President and Chief Executive Officer
Ike Anand

Chief Marketing and Brand Officer
Samantha Maltin

Editor
Jacinthia Christopher

Managing Editor – Visuals
Mike Brown

Contributing Editors
Richard Alley
Amelia Camurati
Sara Clarke-Lopez

Design and Production
Luke Cravens
Lauren Delmonico
Jalen Douglas
Flip180 Media
Zoe Loren

Writers
Monsy Alvarado
Kelly Cox
Bethany Horton
Ruma Kumar
Betsy Taylor
Alban Zamora

Photography
Nikki Boertman
Mike Brown
Dave Cruz
Octavius Holmes
Matt Odom
Dan Perriguey

Special thanks to St. Jude President and CEO James R. Downing, MD, and St. Jude Department of Strategic Communication, Education and Outreach.

St. Jude Children's Research Hospital®
Finding cures. Saving children.
ALSAC • DANNY THOMAS, FOUNDER

For solicitation disclosures, please visit ***stjude**.org/legal*

CONTENTS

You can help ensure families never receive a bill from St. Jude for treatment, travel, housing or food – so they can focus on helping their child live. Donate today at **stjude**.org/ImpactGiving

BEN'S RETURN

After pausing tennis for treatment at St. Jude, Ben is back on the court and using his experience to help others.

By **Betsy Taylor** - ALSAC

The memory from summer 2023 appears to Teresa like a flash sometimes: Teresa and her 14-year-old twin sons, Ben and Will, are sitting in the car by the tennis courts near their home in Georgia. Her cell phone ID shows a call from the ear, nose and throat (ENT) doctor.

"OK, hop out. Let me grab this call," she tells the boys.

So, the boys grab their tennis bags and head toward the courts for practice. They are laughing and turn to wave goodbye, and she waves back. They disappear.

They were as healthy looking as two boys could be. She sees everything now for the gift it was.

"I can still see the boys turning around and waving," Teresa said, "and I did not know that was going to be one of the last normal times for us."

What the ENT doctor relays changes everything. Ben had undergone an MRI. The muffled hearing in Ben's right ear — thought to be swimmer's ear, or nerve damage from an ear infection — was caused by a brain tumor.

Teresa drove to a parking lot and "completely lost it," she said. She called her husband, Kevin, who was away for work.

"I need you to come home," Teresa said. "They found something in Ben's brain, and we're going to need to tell him."

Timeout

Ben underwent surgery at his local hospital to resect the brain tumor. He was diagnosed with WNT-activated medulloblastoma, a subtype of one of the most common cancerous brain tumors in children. He would need ongoing treatment.

Ben's parents researched his diagnosis, which led them to Amar Gajjar, MD, at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital® in Memphis, Tennessee. Gajjar has authored many articles with an interest in innovative protocols for the treatment of childhood brain tumors, including medulloblastoma.

Over more than 35 years at St. Jude, Gajjar has been a pioneer in developing risk-adapted therapies for medulloblastoma. The goals for these therapies are to maximize cure rates while minimizing long-term side effects to enhance patients' quality of life.

The Neuro-Oncology Division at St. Jude, which was led by Gajjar for more than two decades, has worked to tailor treatment based on the individual patient's risk profile. This risk profile is based on tumor biology and molecular composition, including disease subtype, as well as other clinical features.

Ben's family appreciated what this tailored approach could mean for Ben's quality of life.

They received a referral to St. Jude, where the brain tumor team created a non-protocol treatment plan particular to Ben's needs based on his previous surgery and what would best protect him from neurological damage.

Ben made a hard decision: No tennis during treatment.

"He was upset but not discouraged," Kevin said. "He held on to the fact that as he got a little bit stronger and a little bit healthier, he would be right back out there."

Greatest group

While Will and Kevin stayed behind in Georgia to continue with school and work, Ben and Teresa moved into St. Jude housing. There were many visits, but "It was really hard on both boys – and all of us," Kevin said.

Ben underwent months of chemotherapy and then received proton beam radiotherapy to his brain and spine.

Chemotherapy made Ben queasy. He lost weight.

"He was worried because he knew he had to stay strong to beat this thing, and he was determined to find ways to keep eating," Teresa said. "This was a huge challenge and anxiety point during treatment."

But the St. Jude community lifted Ben.

Each day when Ben came for proton beam radiotherapy, three staff members sang songs about how he'd crush that day's procedure.

"Ben, Ben, Ben, gonna do it again!" The women would sing.

"He's getting ready to have radiation to his brain, and he's laughing," Teresa said. "These beautiful ladies made that happen."

Ben had questions for his radiation tech and radiologist: How does proton beam radiotherapy work? What does it do to the bad cells versus the good cells? What are the chances of secondary cancers?

"They looked him in the eye and explained," Teresa said.

Ben attended the St. Jude Imagine Academy by Chili's for his freshman year of high school, earning honors and AP credits.

When Ben celebrated his No More Chemo party, his room filled with doctors, nurses and therapists.

Many not even directly assigned to Ben, but all wishing Ben well.

"The people at St. Jude are the greatest group of human beings that we've ever been around as a collective," Kevin said.

> "THE PEOPLE AT ST. JUDE ARE THE GREATEST GROUP OF HUMAN BEINGS THAT WE'VE EVER BEEN AROUND AS A COLLECTIVE."
>
> – **Kevin,** *Ben's dad*

Journey back

Ben completed treatment in May of 2024, and his scans show no evidence of tumor recurrence or spread.

By July of 2024, Ben resumed tennis practice. "Not at full capacity, but just to make it through," Teresa said.

During his first tournament back, Ben got sick during a match but made it through to the semifinals. Since then, he's played dozens of tournaments.

"You pray your kids have the courage, stamina, faith and all the things to get through it," Teresa said, "and he did."

While Ben and Will were separated, Will became more thoughtful, wondering if it was OK to be happy and still play tennis while his brother was sick and couldn't.

"I'm just so proud that Will stayed very strong, and he was always there for his brother," Kevin said.

Ben's faith in God and intellectualism have made him ask: What good can come out of cancer? How best can I serve?

"Our son is a different person, a better person, not only because of the experience, but also because of the environment that St. Jude provided," Kevin said.

Ben has raised more than $6,000 in toys and gift cards for other St. Jude families.

In December of 2024, Ben ran the 10K at the St. Jude Memphis Marathon® Weekend with his team, Ben's Brain Gang, raising more than $7,000 for St. Jude.

Will was by his side. The fraternal twins are identical in their determination to help others.

Despite the hard separation, Ben and Will have arrived at the same place. Not a finish but a starting line in life, marking what kind of men they will become.

Your support helps patients like Ben get the chance to realize their dreams.
stjude.org/ImpactGiving

CHERISHED MOMENTS

Phenix's family celebrates life's special moments thanks to St. Jude.

By **Monsy Alvarado** - ALSAC

Whether Phenix is army crawling across the floor, taking his first steps or exploring the world in his walker, his parents can always count on his contagious smile and spirited personality to light up their world.

"He is a ball of sunshine, he is always happy," his mom, Amber, said. "That is how we figure out if something is wrong with him, but he is always smiling. There is not one time that my son is not excited. It doesn't even matter if it's 2, 3, 4 o'clock in the morning. He's excited, he's happy."

Phenix's radiant smile and boundless energy, coupled with rare tears, also charms his grandparents, his older brothers and sisters and most strangers he meets.

"He steals every single heart he comes across," his mom added.

His smile has continued to shine brightly most days even after his brain tumor diagnosis and treatment.

At just 5 months old in September 2024, Phenix, the youngest of five, suffered seizures while his paternal grandparents babysat him. His grandmother, Nola, who is known as "Mimi," recalled that evening in detail. She had just fed Phenix his bottle, changed his diaper and handed him over to her husband, Sebastian. A few moments later, she called out to Phenix, but he did not look at her.

"His head was turned to the side, and when I called him, he didn't move. It was not like him because he is always smiling," she said. "When I called him again, next thing I know his head went back, like he wanted to pass out. He wasn't responding to anything."

She immediately dialed 911.

When the first responders arrived, Phenix was back to himself.

"A smiling baby," she recalled.

The first responders examined Phenix. He showed no signs of the seizure, his grandmother said, and they left. As emergency responders drove away and turned the corner, Phenix had another seizure. Nola dialed 911 again.

Some of the first responders who had just left came back. This time, they saw the seizure in progress. They took Phenix to a local emergency room in Michigan where he and his family live.

At the hospital, Phenix had more seizures. Scans showed a solid and cystic mass in his brain, Amber said. When emergency room doctors explained to his parents, Amber and De'Vonte, what they saw in the scans, Amber said it was the worst moment of her life.

"I walked outside and cried, screamed and talked to God," Amber said. "I thought whatever I had to learn, whatever humbling lesson I needed to learn, please don't let it be through my babies."

A few days later, Phenix underwent surgery to remove as much of the large mass as possible. The mass, she said, was located around the middle cerebral artery in his brain, which made total resection of the tumor too dangerous due to the risk of hemorrhage. Following the surgery to remove the tumor, Phenix was diagnosed with infant-type hemispheric glioma (IHG), a rare and fast-growing, high-grade brain tumor that primarily affects children under the age of 1. IHG is recognized by its molecular differences from other types of high-grade glioma, and infants with IHG have a better survival rate than other high-grade gliomas.

A few weeks later, he was referred to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital® in Memphis, Tennessee.

St. Jude provides the highest quality of care for patients with IHG, by bringing together medical experts and specially trained staff to care for such a rare patient population who are incredibly young and fragile. Doctors at St. Jude have extensive experience in treating this rare tumor type.

"When we got to St. Jude, there were more answers here. It was a lot to go through as far as him being a baby, but it was still a lot less complicated than what it could have been," Amber recalled. "They take care of you."

> "They are making sure he is meeting all his developmental milestones that he's supposed to depending on his age."
>
> – **Amber,** Phenix's mom

Amber's mom, Gloria, packed her bags too, feeling she needed to be there for her grandson and daughter.

"I had heard about St. Jude, but you really don't understand what it is until you get there," she said. "When we first got there, I went to all the appointments, and I saw how the doctors and nurses communicated with Amber. They made it easier."

Phenix began chemotherapy at St. Jude.

As he received treatment, Phenix's parents, grandparents and siblings cherished every milestone reached along the way, especially during his first year of life. It was at St. Jude where Amber was able to record her baby say his first word, "mama." Amber said she had heard him say it before, but it was at St. Jude, as Phenix lay in his crib, that she was able to capture it on her phone for all to witness.

It was at St. Jude where Phenix also spent his first Halloween. His mom, a nail artist and do-it-yourself enthusiast, figured out how to make him a scuba diving costume. As her son lay in his crib, she spent hours lovingly designing the outfit using everyday items such as an empty water bottle to mimic an oxygen tank.

Phenix also spent his first Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day at St. Jude. His grandparents, Nola and Sebastian, flew to Memphis to be with Phenix and his parents both on Thanksgiving and Christmas. Nola and Sebastian recalled that Amber cooked a traditional Thanksgiving meal with all the trimmings. Before they ate, they gave thanks for Phenix and prayed for his health and his caregivers.

"I continue to pray for St. Jude and their team and their staff. They treat you like you are part of the family," Sebastian said.

> "When we got to St. Jude, there were more answers here."
>
> – **Amber,** Phenix's mom

"It's so amazing the things that they do. I've never experienced something like that. Thank God for St. Jude and the care they provide for the children."

A few days before Christmas, Phenix had brain surgery, between rounds of chemotherapy to attempt to reduce the residual tumor. Amber and De'Vonte, as well as Phenix's grandparents, tried to make it as special as possible. The family wore matching pajamas and took family photos. They again were thankful that their little boy had bounced back quickly after his surgery.

"We got him some gifts," Amber recalled. "We spent time with one another even though we were missing out on the rest of our children and the family members we usually spend it with."

At St. Jude, Phenix also attended physical and occupational therapy sessions. With each session, he swiftly grasped new movements and techniques, his mom proudly states.

"He plays with toys, and they are working on his motor skills, grabbing toys, sitting up and working on standing up," she said. "They are making sure he is meeting all his developmental milestones that he's supposed to depending on his age."

Phenix finished chemotherapy treatment in March of 2025 and went home the following month. He returns to St. Jude for regular checkups.

His first birthday was among the first celebrations his family marked when they returned home. It was a day full of joy.

"St. Jude means a chance at life for my son, a much longer time with my son," Amber said. "His birthday is a celebration of life."

You can help kids like Phenix get the chance to meet more of life's milestones.
stjude.org/ImpactGiving

PIONEERING BREAKTHROUGHS

Dr. Alberto Pappo oversees pediatric solid tumor research that turns lab discoveries into clinical trials at St. Jude.

By **Alban Zamora** - ALSAC

Alberto Pappo, MD, didn't just follow a career path — he followed a calling.

It all began in Mexico City, where he attended medical school, and continued in San Antonio, Texas, where he completed his residency in 1988, followed by a fellowship in pediatric hematology-oncology in Dallas.

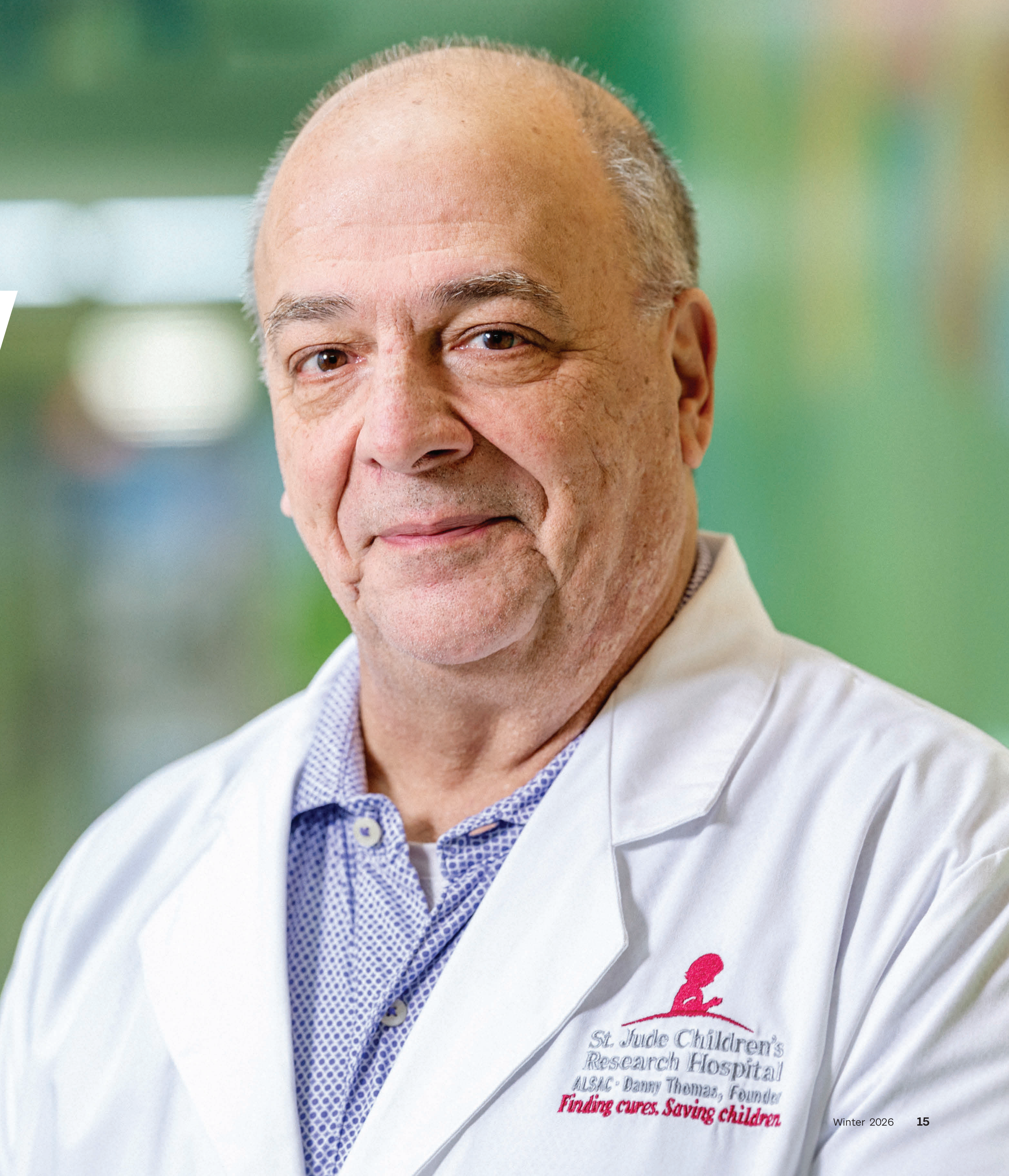
He vividly remembers the moment that changed his career trajectory and brought him to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital® in 1991 for his first job.

"I was asked if I wanted to come and interview here for a job, and I almost fainted," he recalled. "I said, 'Of course', because everybody that I used to read about and everybody that I emulated was from St. Jude, so what an incredible privilege to come and work here with these investigators that I admired so much. It's the best decision I've ever made."

Today, he is one of the leaders of the Developmental Biology & Solid Tumor Program at the research hospital. To improve survival rates, the program focuses on understanding the mechanisms of the therapeutic response so researchers can create strategies to overcome treatment resistance and prevent recurrence.

Pappo also played a critical role in the establishment of the St. Jude Childhood Solid Tumor Network in 2013. The network aims to accelerate discoveries by providing information on hundreds of tissue samples from pediatric tumors that are made available freely worldwide. For him, this type of collaboration in his field is the way to develop and accelerate new treatments for children with very aggressive solid tumors.

He specializes in treating and researching bone and soft tissue tumors, as well as rare pediatric cancers such as melanomas, gastrointestinal stromal tumors and soft tissue sarcomas. Rare types of childhood cancers account for about 10% to 11% of all cases, he said.



> **“I aim to understand why these rare cancers affect children and define how the pediatric forms of these cancers differ from the adult forms.”**
>
> **– Alberto Pappo, MD**
> *Co-Leader, Developmental Biology & Solid Tumor Program*

“I aim to understand why these rare cancers affect children and define how the pediatric forms of these cancers differ from the adult forms. Our findings can then be used to tailor current treatments and pursue novel treatment strategies.”

At the heart of Pappo’s philosophy is the belief in translational research – turning laboratory discoveries into clinical trials. “What we believe is that translational research will provide better cures for these children. So that’s really the whole paradigm that we use here at St. Jude, and that’s how we want to translate that also to the rest of the world,” he said.

Another of Pappo’s most significant contributions is his research on pediatric melanoma, a type of skin cancer that affects about 300-400 children and teens each year in the United States. If left untreated, it can spread to other parts of the body.

“What we have discovered here at St. Jude is that this term of ‘pediatric melanoma’ is very broad. There are many different types. And the vast majority of them actually do not require extensive therapy other than surgical removal. We were one of the first ones who were able to show those differences in how pediatric melanoma behaves,” he said.

He acknowledged that this is possible thanks to the role of donors in supporting St. Jude. “It’s through their donations that we’re able to conduct the research that we do and provide care for patients,” Pappo said.

St. Jude, he said, has “moved the needle against some rare pediatric cancers,” but he added that there are many “left to tackle.” He’s committed to continuing to make progress against these diseases every day. One child at a time.

Therefore, it’s not surprising that Pappo describes his motivation as “providing the best care for my patients.” He cherishes the accomplishment of “providing hope for families and letting them know that they’re in one of the best places possible and their child will be taken care of.”

Small gestures

Given the focus Pappo has on his patients and their experiences, it’s not surprising that families sometimes find a personal way to show their gratitude. When Pappo recalls the small gestures of appreciation from St. Jude families, his face lights up with joy.

It’s easy for him to share heartfelt stories of the countless moments he’s spent with the patients and families from diverse cultural backgrounds he serves at St. Jude, forming bonds that reflect his genuine care and commitment to their well-being.

“I’ve had many Hispanic families, and many Mexican families who always bring me chamoys, piloncillo, tamarindo and mazapan when they go to Mexico,” he said with a smile as he mentioned some of his favorite sweet treats from his own home country. “That makes me very happy because we don’t have that here (in Memphis, Tennessee).”

He is proud of the commitment St. Jude has to patients from around the world, which is reflected in its efforts to provide clinical and non-clinical resources in multiple languages.

“For example, our website has been translated into multiple languages. This is very important for families that don’t have access to regular information on pediatric cancer,” Pappo said. St. Jude cares for some of the world’s sickest children regardless of their race, ethnicity, beliefs or ability to pay. Its patients receive the customized care they need to treat childhood cancer and other life-threatening diseases, no matter what barriers they may face.

Make an even greater impact by giving an additional gift to help fuel the groundbreaking research of physician scientists like Dr. Pappo.
stjude.org/ImpactGiving

Flourishing again

St. Jude is helping Yike survive leukemia while inspiring her art with themes of reflection and rebirth.

By **Ruma Kumar** - ALSAC

The day she turned 18 felt surreal for Yike. She hadn't been sure she'd reach her 18th birthday.

She hadn't expected she'd be in Memphis, 8,000 miles from her hometown, standing on the campus of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital® proudly displaying two of her paintings in an art show.

She certainly hadn't expected professional basketball players from the San Antonio Spurs, who had been visiting the research hospital campus that day, to sing "Happy Birthday" to her.

Looking at her painting "Rebirth," a self-portrait with a tree of life growing within her body, Yike said her time at St. Jude has defied expectations in so many ways.

"After all the treatment I had at St. Jude, I felt like it was a rebirth of me," Yike said. "Without St. Jude, the tree of life might have died, but with St. Jude it is flourishing again."

Yike grew up in Guangzhou, a large port city on the Pearl River roughly 75 miles from Hong Kong. She speaks fondly of the city known for its bustling commerce and vibrant marketplaces but also leisurely dim sum meals of delicate shrimp dumplings and yolky egg buns. She grew up with her mother, father and paternal grandparents.

Her mother, Ru, encouraged Yike to pursue diverse interests hoping to coax her shy daughter out of her shell. And it worked. Yike spent active afternoons with friends, playing badminton and basketball and running track. Yike was studious, a voracious reader, with a particular interest in science and biology, and drew portraits and landscapes when she felt pensive.

"My mother inspired the curiosity I have of the world," Yike said. "She gave me a lot of confidence, a sense of belonging, a sense of security and love."

It was a heady and fulfilling life, which is why the fatigue that suddenly overtook Yike when she was 16 was so unexpected. So unwelcome.

Used to running every afternoon with her friends, Yike was barely able to climb stairs without gasping for breath. She wanted to nap. She found bruises all over her body. Her gums began bleeding.

Watching documentaries about cancer one day, Yike began to suspect she might be suffering from something serious and asked her mother to schedule a doctor's appointment.

Blood tests at the doctor revealed leukemia. And a bone marrow biopsy the following day confirmed it was acute myeloid leukemia (AML), a cancer of the blood and bone marrow.

AML affects stem cells, which eventually mature into red blood cells, white blood cells or platelets. In AML, the bone marrow makes white blood cells that don't work as they should, leaving the patient without enough healthy white blood cells to fight infections. It is the second most common childhood leukemia. Pediatric AML is most common in infants and toddlers under age 2 and in teenagers.

The rapid development and unpredictability of AML, which has several different subtypes, makes it complicated to treat. Still, despite its prevalence, the overall survival rate for AML in children has been about 70% in the U.S.

Yike began chemotherapy treatment in her hometown hospital, but her family was relocating around this time to Tennessee. Following their move, the family sought further treatment at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital®.

Yike and Ru first visited St. Jude in April 2024, just as the dogwoods were in bloom, and both mother and daughter were heartened to see a glistening skyline in downtown Memphis along the Mississippi River, a comforting similarity to the hometown they'd just left behind.

At St. Jude, doctors performed a bone marrow aspirate to see if Yike had evidence of residual leukemia following her treatment in China.

Following test results that her bone marrow was positive for AML, Yike began another round of chemotherapy at St. Jude during which she did not achieve remission, which led doctors to determine a stem cell transplant was the best option for long-term survival for Yike because the type of AML she had was high-risk and could relapse. The goal of the stem cell transplant is to replace the diseased bone marrow with healthy stem cells so the body will be able to produce healthy blood cells.

Yike received the transplant on Aug. 2, but the process is a significant one because of energy expended from the patient's body to heal from the conditioning regiment of chemotherapy and to build a new blood system.

"I was very grateful to be here. It's a place that I can't imagine its existence in the world," Yike said. "The people here, everybody is so nice, they treat you like family, made us feel like home."

She turned to art during treatment, before and after her transplant.

She's painted many pieces, but proudly described one she most recently finished, called "The Invincible Summer." It is a self-portrait depicting herself as two seasons, winter and summer. It's a duality she had experienced as a cancer patient, a winter self, sad and hollow, and a joyful, hopeful summer self.

> **"**
>
> **After all the treatment I had at St. Jude, I felt like it was a rebirth of me.**
>
> **– Yike,** *St. Jude patient*

"We all have times of difficulty, a winter in life, but the summer is invincible," Yike said. "That's what I feel of myself."

"Art is like an indispensable part of my life," she said. "I always found art as a way to express myself and especially at St. Jude. Art is another language for me to remember all the things that happened in this journey. I also see art as a way to pass down my energy to other people. I send my artwork to my friends here and also to friends back home and I hope that they will gain strength when they see my artwork."

Since the transplant, Yike is growing stronger and her cancer is in remission. Her immune system is still recovering, but her health is improving and she plans to finish high school.

She hopes to study psychology in college, saying the therapy and counseling she received at St. Jude inspired her career path because it helped her find healthy ways to cope.

"St. Jude lightened our burden," Yike said.

Your support helps patients like Yike continue to flourish.
stjude.org/ImpactGiving

LEGACY OF LOVE

Pennsylvania man honors his wife by helping the children she loved.

By **Bethany Horton** - ALSAC

Jack Keffer's love for his wife, Janet, is bigger than the lifetime they shared.

In 1967, when possibility seemed to hover in the air, Jack and Janet were high school students who found their own love in a small Pennsylvania town. Together through college, they married soon after graduation. Though they were just kids, they knew what they had was rare and they held on tight for the 50 years they shared.

Decades after they married, Jack and Janet – or Jan as Jack affectionately called her – had built a life as beautiful as their love. Looking for ways to “pay it forward,” they began donating small amounts here and there to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital®. Janet, a passionate educator, deeply connected to the efforts by St. Jude to keep families together throughout children's treatment for catastrophic illnesses. In her career, she had seen how a child's connection to their caretaker helped them thrive.

Soon after Jack retired from a long career at an international manufacturing company, Janet came to him with an idea to purchase a brick on the Pathway to Hope. This meaningful walkway through the St. Jude campus, composed of engraved bricks, was funded by families and supporters.

While the program concluded in 2022, these special bricks remain in place, honoring the recovery or memory of beloved St. Jude children. “We purchased a brick and Janet had it inscribed with ‘Paying It Forward. Calling On Angels,’” Jack said. “So that was kind of our cornerstone.”

“At that point in time, we started talking about how we could help St. Jude in a bigger way. Then Jan was diagnosed with triple negative breast cancer in 2015,” he said. Within 3 years, the cancer had metastasized, and Janet passed away.

“She never got to see St. Jude, and I certainly have a problem with that fact. So, from that point on, I sort of took up the gauntlet,” he said. “I wanted to honor her.”

“St. Jude is in our will, in my will. But I feel good about the fact that I'm also promoting St. Jude and honoring my wife, Janet now – while I'm living,” Jack said. “This is my legacy now, as opposed to just leaving what's left after I'm gone. I'm seeing it work, in action.”

> *“This is my legacy now, as opposed to just leaving what's left after I'm gone. I'm seeing it work, in action.*
>
> – **Jack Keffer,** *St. Jude donor*

Like many legacy donors, Jack worked with a financial advisor to find ways his generosity could make the biggest impact at St. Jude. “I found out that there were things I could get involved in that made more of a difference than I thought I could possibly make,” he said.

“My advisor directed me to a qualified charitable distribution from my IRA, which is tax free. So that was a great idea. Rather than $85 going to St. Jude, more like $100 will go to St. Jude because I'm not paying taxes.”

When Jack learned St. Jude was breaking ground on a new family housing facility, The Domino's Village, he jumped at the chance to put his funds to work while further honoring Janet. This would be his second significant gift given in her memory – each gift recognized with a plaque in her honor.

“The Domino's Village keeps the child and the family together. So, supporting that was so far one of the highlights of my giving,” he said.

You can join Jack Keffer in leaving a legacy in support of St. Jude.
stjude.org/ImpactGiving

Healing Journey

Valentina found hope and lifesaving care at St. Jude – 2,500 miles from home.

By **Monsy Alvarado** - ALSAC

Paola never imagined that the cancer diagnosis of her youngest daughter, Valentina, would lead her to temporarily leave her husband and her eldest daughter.

"I cried the whole way here," Paola recalled.

Valentina had been fine just a few months earlier. She was 4 years old, energetic and full of curiosity, discovering the world around her in Ecuador's capital city of Quito in the Andes mountains. During the last few days of June 2024, things changed. Valentina's maternal grandmother noticed a small firm lump in her belly. She called Paola, who was at work, and they met at the emergency room at a nearby hospital.

Valentina was admitted. Paola spent the weekend in the hospital while her little girl waited to undergo CT scans and several other tests.

As more tests were completed and they awaited results, Valentina's family became increasingly concerned. On July 3, 2024, Paola met with an oncologist whose words hit her like a wave: Valentina had Wilms tumor, the most common type of kidney cancer in children. It wasn't just one tumor. There were tumors in both of her daughter's kidneys.

Valentina began chemotherapy within days of her diagnosis and continued treatment through July, August and September. At first, she seemed to respond well. But after two months, doctors found the tumors hadn't shrunk. Surgery was scheduled to remove her left kidney, which contained the largest tumor. It took place in September and lasted six hours.

As the family waited for next steps, Valentina's doctor referred her to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital®, 2,500 miles from home. St. Jude has experience treating children with bilateral Wilms tumors. In fact, around 15% of children in the United States with bilateral Wilms tumors undergo surgery at St. Jude.

Less than a week after arriving at the hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, Valentina underwent surgery. This time she had a nephron-sparing surgery, with a goal of removing only the tumor and preserving as much healthy tissue in her right kidney as possible. This approach maintains high survival rates while allowing children the greatest chance of avoiding kidney failure and dialysis.

Valentina's surgery was followed by treatment on a clinical trial that uses proton beam radiotherapy to treat Wilms tumor, and she continued treatment with chemotherapy. Her response to the chemotherapy has been carefully monitored since her body is processing the medications with one injured kidney.

Paola's concerns – including how she would pay for treatment – began to disappear soon after arriving at St. Jude. There, the staff explained that families never receive a bill from St. Jude for treatment, travel, housing or food.

"This was a dream," Paola said. "St. Jude is a blessing to us, and it gives us hope."

Longing for home

Paola describes Valentina as a sweet and imaginative girl who not only completed her family when she was born but also brought them closer.

Valentina misses her dad, Diego, and her sister, Wendy, and the simple joys of home. Among them are the yellow potatoes that her family harvests and the flavors of the typical Ecuadorian food that her grandmother cooks with a lot of love. Paola works hard to make those dishes that remind Valentina of home and spark her appetite when nothing else will.

Valentina and Paola are grateful for the friends they have made in Memphis, many of whom have supported them through some difficult times. They spent Christmas and New Year's Eve at St. Jude, a very different experience from the large family gatherings they have at home.

Both were looking forward to the arrival of midnight on Dec. 31, curious to see how New Year was celebrated in another country. But when they looked out the window of their apartment, everything was dark and silent. It was a stark contrast to celebrations in Ecuador, which include fireworks, dancing and life-sized dolls stuffed with paper, fabric and other materials, that represent the "old year." The dolls are set ablaze on the street to add to the revelry.

> *"St. Jude is a blessing to us, and it gives us hope."*
>
> – **Paola,** *Valentina's mom*

"Valentina said she was going to sleep because it was boring," Paola said with a laugh.

Some unfamiliar experiences were exciting though. The new year and the Memphis winter brought an opportunity for Valentina to experience snow for the first time.

Paola and Valentina say they look forward to being reunited with their loved ones. Paola said she will always be grateful for St. Jude and how well they have taken care of her daughter.

"I believe Valentina has a strong chance to grow up," she said. "The doctors are very reassuring, and the place is designed to care not only for the well-being of the children, but also for the caregivers."

You can help give patients like Valentina the chance to enjoy more family gatherings.
stjude.org/ImpactGiving

Madeline's TRIUMPH

Anthony helped his daughter through her treatment for Ewing sarcoma with the support of St. Jude.

By **Anthony** - MADELINE'S DAD

I'm going to jump right in with the worst night of my life.

In March 2024, I was in India co-leading a trip with a group of study-abroad students. My family was back home in Virginia. I had just gone to bed. It was midnight. The phone rang. My wife, Miranda, was telling me to get home immediately. Our daughter, Madeline, had been diagnosed with cancer.

Hearing those words, out of the blue, 8,000 miles away, felt like an actual nightmare.

Madeline had been having shoulder pain, but we thought it was from the heavy backpack she lugged to school. She was 12 years old. Who suspects cancer in a kid?

I left the same night, taking a 4-hour cab ride, a 16-hour flight, another flight and a rental car. Through waves of guilt, worry and anger, I was desperate to get to my child. Within hours of reaching her, it was time for another journey. We were referred to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital®: a much shorter journey, but a more momentous one.

At St. Jude, Madeline's cancer was identified as Ewing sarcoma, originating in her upper chest. Our fun, mercurial, intelligent, creative, confident daughter would have to undergo months of cancer treatment.

I found myself thinking: How is this happening to us? But at St. Jude, I saw all these families going through their own struggles and realized: Cancer doesn't pick one person, one class or one culture. All walks of life are facing this, and we need help, and we need hope, and St. Jude is here for us.

I started to think about hope not just more, but differently. Hope is not some frivolous, feel-good kind of thing. It's gritty. It's tenacious. It's saying, even when the odds look awful: *We're going to do this*. Hope is built into everything at St. Jude. It's this big, healing medicine they give, and it's everywhere.

It's been about a year now since we've completed the main treatment at St. Jude. With chemo, Madeline had her ups and downs, but really, she handled everything like a boss. (Now a teenager, she hates when I say I'm proud of her for how she handled treatment, but I am.) Seeing her go through this was the hardest thing I've ever done, but being by her side for it was the greatest gift I've ever been given. Gratitude is not a big enough word.

I want to be clear, though. I have nothing nice to say about childhood cancer. My genuine opinion of it can't be printed here. It sucks. Childhood cancer is a bane. It's hateful. It's hard to say, "My child has cancer, but there's still good in the world." But incredibly, St. Jude does help you find something positive, even in the worst, darkest times.

Fortunately, Madeline has been extremely resilient, probably more than me and Miranda. She was already mature in her emotional intelligence, but she is even more so now. Most importantly, she is doing very well. She is happy, and seeing her happiness always fills me with joy and satisfaction, and now, with thanks for St. Jude.

Your continued support helps give patients like Madeline the chance to spend more time with family. **stjude**.org/ImpactGiving

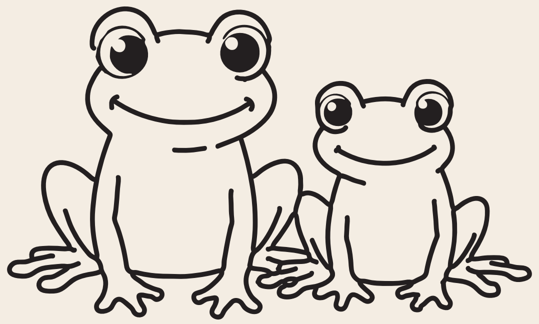
PAGING Dr. Maizy

St. Jude is healing Maizy as Maizy heals her family.

By **Betsy Taylor** - ALSAC

Maizy, with her tiny glasses perched on her nose and a toy stethoscope dangling around her neck, exudes a sense of purpose and authority. The 3-year-old girl from Alabama has observed her beloved doctor, Ching-Hon Pui, MD, at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital® performing his doctorly tasks, and she wants to be just like him – but with a 3-year-old's twist.

Her younger sister, Piper, plays along, lying on the living room floor for Maizy's examinations.



"Okay, Piper, let's see what's wrong," Maizy says, placing the stethoscope on Piper's chest and then her stomach. "Take a deep breath."

"Ribbit, ribbit," Maizy has declared. "There are frogs in your tummy!"

Piper's laughter fills the room.

With a toy syringe, Maizy administers a pretend shot. "All done! You're so brave, Piper."

Piper beams.

It's true, their mom, Stefanie, said. Piper is brave, and so is Maizy. Their family of four has had to grow in bravery through Maizy's diagnosis and treatment for T-cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia.

It started in November 2023 with swollen lymph nodes that continued growing even after Maizy began taking antibiotics. A CT scan at her local hospital revealed a mass in Maizy's chest, and soon she was referred to St. Jude.

Pui confirmed her leukemia diagnosis, and Maizy began a chemotherapy treatment plan.

The chemotherapy quickly resulted in her cancer going into remission. Then treatment continued with a goal of killing any hidden leukemia cells and keeping the leukemia from returning. Fortunately, she has been able to receive much of her treatment close to their home through coordination with the St. Jude Clinic in Huntsville, Alabama.

"St. Jude has been the best thing that's ever happened to us," Stefanie said.

During the summer of 2024, Maizy experienced a scary anaphylaxis episode caused by an allergy to one of the chemotherapy medicines. Working with St. Jude Clinical Pharmacy Services, Pui quickly adapted a new plan with a different effective medication that didn't cause an allergic reaction.

'I am brave'

Maizy wears a white dress embellished with a pattern of yellow ribbons signifying childhood cancer awareness. She has arrived at St. Jude for checkups to make sure her body shows no evidence of cancer. Some of the procedures require anesthesia, but undergoing anesthesia can feel disorienting.

Stefanie eases Maizy's mind, asking her to repeat words of affirmation. They do this every time, and Maizy has committed these words to memory.

"I am smart, I am kind, I am brave," says Maizy, knitting her brows in concentration.

Stefanie's soothing voice coaxes Maizy to keep going. Maizy's care team circulates throughout the room, doing their work quietly and unobtrusively, so as not to interrupt.

"I am beautiful," Maizy says. "I am courageous."

Maizy's eyes droop as the anesthesia takes effect.

> *"Every day we wake up knowing that there's nobody in the world that we would rather have providing care to our baby. St. Jude reinforces that every day."*
>
> – **Trey,** *Maizy's dad*

> *When we got to St. Jude, it felt like they were picking up the pieces for us. They were showing us that there was a way to hope despite what we were going through.*
>
> – **Stefanie,** *Maizy's mom*

St. Jude patient Maizy shares a friendly moment with her beloved doctor Ching-Hon Pui, MD, during a clinical checkup in November 2024 at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

"I love you," Stefanie whispers and kisses Maizy's head. "Dream big."

Back home in Alabama, Stefanie works as a nurse, but she said she's grateful that at St. Jude, "I can just be Mommy."

New outlook

Before cancer, Maizy's dad, Trey, was a jokester. He said he liked "keeping things light." He never admitted when he might need help. But now, Trey said, "There are times when I just break down.

"I can't do this by myself. I need prayer. I need time with God."

And he needs St. Jude.

"Every day we wake up knowing that there's nobody in the world that we would rather have providing care to our baby," Trey said. "St. Jude reinforces that every day."

Maizy has several months left of chemotherapy. She has blossomed, despite everything.

Now Trey wants to give back and share their story to help others.

"This journey has broken me down to build me back up," Trey said.

Stefanie shared the story of how one day during their first week at St. Jude, she and Trey were crying. Maizy handed them tissue.

"It's going to be OK," little Maizy told them.

"We cried even more," Stefanie said, at the sweetness of that gesture and how Maizy couldn't possibly comprehend the enormity of cancer.

How could things be OK?

Their answer has been St. Jude.

"When we got to St. Jude, it felt like they were picking up the pieces for us," Stefanie said. "They were showing us that there was a way to hope despite what we were going through."

They are OK now.

Maizy was right all along.

Your gift can help support treatment for patients like Maizy.
stjude.org/ImpactGiving

Meet the Artist:
HAZEL

Hazel began chemotherapy for acute lymphoblastic leukemia at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital® on her 6th birthday. For the next nearly three years, Hazel was "thrown into a world of all eyes on her," said her mom. But Hazel's world was never all about cancer. Formerly a shy child, she came out of her shell. She became a dinosaur aficionado, a repository of interesting animal facts, an avid reader of mysteries and an artist.

During this time, she created a pair of tropical fish by tracing the shape of her own hands, coloring them in vividly with markers and adding stick-on "googly eyes." Pasted onto an aqua backdrop with seagrass below, the fish appear to be on their way to something fun. The vibe of the piece reflects Hazel's vibrant personality, both then and now.

Hazel completed treatment in 2021. She went on to adopt new interests, like playing the clarinet in her school band, but art has remained a mainstay. Recently, her fish art was animated and featured in an advertising campaign for St. Jude that appeared in Times Square in New York City. Now a teenager, Hazel continues to create art and returns to St. Jude for yearly checkups.

Bring patient art to life with this AR experience.

Scan the QR code. Then hold camera over page to begin.

St. Jude Children's Research Hospital®
Finding cures. Saving children.
ALSAC • DANNY THOMAS, FOUNDER
501 St. Jude Place
Memphis, TN 38105

Nonprofit Org.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
St. Jude Children's
Research Hospital

Meet Adriana

Adriana was 5 years old in 2023 when she was diagnosed with leukemia after experiencing leg pain. At first, her mom, Laura, thought it was a result of a fall at school. After several doctor's visits and a blood analysis, Adriana was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL), a cancer that affects the white blood cells.

"It was shock mostly because you never expect your kid to be diagnosed with something like leukemia. You hear about it, but you think, 'No, it couldn't be us,'" Laura said.

Adriana was referred to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital® in Memphis, Tennessee, and arrived by ambulance from Louisiana. Laura said she immediately felt relief and hope. "St. Jude makes me feel part of something bigger. We are not just a number," she said. "The staff care for their patients, and you feel heard and seen as a parent."

Adriana has completed treatment and returns to St. Jude regularly for check-ups.

You help bring hope and healing to patients like Adriana when you support St. Jude. Did you know many ways to give with non-cash assets – like stocks and IRAs – may present unique opportunities to save on taxes while furthering the St. Jude mission? Donate today at **stjude**.org/ImpactGiving