

LIFESTYLE

A REAL SURPRISE

AN UNLIKELY OSCAR WINNER, *THE COUNTERFEITERS*, E3



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ADVICE 2 • ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT 3 • TV 3 • MOVIES 4 • C

After losing her young daughter to cancer, a South Florida mother turns devastation to hope for families facing a similar loss.



If you go

What: The Fancy Jeans Spring Bash, benefiting The Jessica June Children's Cancer Foundation

When: 6 to 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Poolside at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, 1 Seminole Way, Hollywood

Cost: \$50 in advance; \$60 at the door, includes two cocktails, hors d'oeuvres, entertainment, silent auction and raffle tickets

Info: jjccf.org or 954-593-5603

IN HER MEMORY: Sandra Muvdi with a poster of her daughter. "God's calling was very clear," she says of the foundation. Staff photo/Mike

'this is my mission'

Sandra Muvdi did what many working moms do. She changed her career so she could spend more time with her daughter.

Then, within a span of a few days, the divorced mother of one became a devastated mother of none.

Jessica June Eiler died of acute myelogenous leukemia in October 2003. She was 7.

"When she died, I was no longer a parent," says Muvdi, 41, of Fort Lauderdale. "As soon as she was diagnosed, I never went back to teaching. I lost my purpose for living.

"Then, I heard my calling."

Muvdi is an intense, slender woman with long hair and a hypnotic gaze. Inside her office at Broward General Medical Center, surrounded by stuffed animals, booklets and supplies, I can't help but feel immersed in the depth of "her purpose."

Sherri
Winston
COLUMNIST



The Jessica June Children's Cancer Foundation will celebrate its fourth year in May. Do the math: That means Muvdi launched the organization, whose main purpose is to provide financial assistance to needy families dealing with a child's cancer diagnosis, just months after her daughter died.

The Fancy Jeans Spring Break Bash and cocktail party on Saturday at the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino is Muvdi's biggest annual fundraiser.

Last year, her foundation raised \$70,000. "Not bad," she says, "considering we have a full-time staff of one."

Muvdi is the one.

With the money she and a corps of volunteers raise, Muvdi assists financially strapped families coping with living costs such as rent, car payments, phone bills or food — necessities that become hardships as parents try to meet the demands of caring for a critically ill child.

Muvdi, her frame taut, her determination punctuated in the exactness of each syllable, leans closer. "God's calling was very clear," she says. "And that's what gave me a new purpose to wake up and keep living every day."

There is a fierceness in her that

■ JESSICA CONTINUES ON 5E

'The pain ... will never go away,

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but this helps me'

■ JESSICA

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

makes me want to flinch. I've seen that look before. More than 35 years ago, when my family struggled with the cancer diagnosis of my 3-year-old brother, I saw that look in my mother's eyes.

Unlike Muvdi, however, after the death of Anthony at age 5, that light went out.

"This is my mission, my new purpose. Without it, I don't think I could get up in the morning," Muvdi says.

What happened with Muvdi's daughter is a chilling reminder of how precious life really is. Jessica had been a normal, healthy, happy kid doing all the healthy, happy, kid things. Muvdi, who has an MBA, had split herself between the career-mommy stuff, like so many of us.

But Muvdi wanted more time with her daughter, so she gave up the corporate track and worked at becoming a teacher. She had just begun teaching at a middle school in late September '03 when she got a call that her daughter wasn't feeling well.

Muvdi didn't panic. Probably the flu. "I'd never even given anything like cancer a second thought," she says.

But the symptoms intensified and six days later Muvdi decided to take her daughter to the emergency room.

On Sunday morning, Muvdi learned her daughter had a rare form of blood cancer. By 10 p.m., Jessica had slipped into a coma and never regained consciousness.

Doctors removed her from life support four days later.

She helped them heal

Sitting in Muvdi's bright, cheery-in-spite-of-itself office, you might wonder how she comes in, every day, to face other families with seriously ill or dying children.

"For me, to be able to meet with the families at the worst time in their lives, it's healing," Muvdi says.

And families from Chris Evert Children's Hospital, Joe DiMaggio Children Hospital and Jackson Memorial might attest to how Muvdi helped them heal, too.

Patricia White was still nursing her 8-week-old son Dominique when she decided to take Shawn, 3, to a new pediatrician. Something wasn't right with her beautiful, blond little boy.

Throughout her pregnancy, she'd taken Shawn back and forth to the



JESSICA HAD BEEN A NORMAL, HEALTHY, HAPPY KID: Jessica June with her mother, Sandra Muvdi. Photo courtesy of Sandra Muvdi

doctor and was told she had an over-active mommy-to-be imagination.

"I can remember the new pediatrician's exact words," recalls White in her Coral Springs home. "She said, 'Oh my God! Take him to Joe DiMaggio's immediately.' I couldn't believe it."

That was a year ago. Now Shawn, 4, sits in a motorized wheelchair, his cancer in remission after several surgeries to remove a mass from his cerebellum.

He is surrounded by family and loves music. When he requests "his songs," his eyes twinkle. Shawn has lost a lot of mobility and his speech is difficult to understand, but White feels blessed to have her son. And blessed to have kept her family together with the help of the Jessica June Children's Cancer Foundation.

"I was a bookkeeper. When I couldn't give the company I worked for a full-time commitment, I was fired," White says. With two incomes cut to one, White, 27, and her live-in boyfriend, Travis Granmis, 28, struggled to pay their car loan, rent and other basics.

Granmis says, "At first, the check for \$500 that the foundation gives you, it's like nothing. You're just worried about the next thing. And the next. And the next. Then you see it puts just enough of a dent in it that you can get by."

White continues to take Shawn in for follow-up treatments and she maintains contact with Muvdi.

"She's like an angel. You meet people sometimes who just go far beyond anything you ever imagined. That's



TELLING THE STORY: Jessica June drew this picture in the pediatric emergency room on Oct. 5, 2003. She died four days later. Drawing courtesy Sandra Muvdi

Sandra."

Broward General pediatric cancer center social worker Bernadette Brunetti, says of the foundation: "We're so fortunate she has created this foundation. She's worked so hard to raise money for so many families. We're blessed to have her right here in the hospital."

Still, not everyone believed Muvdi should pursue a calling so indelibly linked to the death of her child. Shortly after Jessica's death, family members were skeptical that she would immerse herself in the lives of other cancer patients.

"They said, 'You have a degree in business, you could be making so much money...' I think they were afraid for me. I think they didn't want me to become obsessed."

Muvdi says that 100 percent of the funds she raises goes to the foundation. She takes no salary. Muvdi lives in a family-owned condo and her daily expenses are met with a small inheritance from her mother's death.

She says balance is a key buzzword in her life. "After the Fancy Jeans event, the fundraiser, I really will try to

get more time for myself."

Trying to move forward

Although it might be easy from the outside to look at Muvdi's life and determine that she needs to "move on" or "get past" her daughter's death, I know how her kind of loss changes families.

From the moment my brother was put into the ground, he was erased from our lives. No photos, mementos — and, for goodness sake, no mention of his name. The concern Muvdi's family felt is understandable, not wanting her to be consumed by the grief.

Yet, my family tried that. Tried to move forward. Now memories of my childhood are thick with silence and gray rooms where no light could penetrate. We lived in the smoky haze of my mother's depression.

Muvdi can't seem to look away from the killer that took her child; my family couldn't bear to face it.

"The pain of losing a child will never go away, but this helps me. My family understands that now. I don't criticize anyone for just doing noth-

ing," she says, when I share a little of my past. "The pain of just being alive is so incredible that just the fact that you're alive and doing nothing is still something."

When Muvdi isn't advocating for the parents of ill children or visiting the patients and passing out toys, she is hustling funds. The Fancy Jeans event, in its third year, is her biggest challenge.

"It takes me six months to pull this together," she says.

Perhaps coming to the aid of other parents struggling through a cancer crisis gives Muvdi a sense of power. Her daughter died so quickly, that Muvdi never had a chance to fight for her. Now she fights for others.

"The foundation makes my daughter happy," Muvdi says, glancing at the poster-size portrait of Jessica on her office wall. "My daughter is my inspiration. She knows this is my calling."

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