



making memories

Led by a mom who lost her only child to cancer, the Jessica June Children's Cancer Foundation tries to give families something to smile about

BY KIKI BOCHI

Imagine your child has cancer. Now imagine you have no way to take her to the hospital.

That was the case for Aida Bernal, whose daughter was diagnosed with liver cancer. Every time they had to go to the hospital for tests or treatment, Bernal had to make her sick child walk to the Broward County bus stop, where they would wait. Depending on which hospital or doctor they needed to go to, the one-way trip could take up to three hours. When they were done, they would take the bus back and walk home.

That was simply not acceptable to Sandra Muvdi. A woman on a mission, she mustered the donations and community resources to get the struggling mom a car.

"She changed my life," says Bernal, whose daughter eventually received a liver and kidney transplant and is now doing well. "It's not just about the car. You can't imagine what it does to your life when your child has cancer. When I thought there was no way out, Sandra helped me. When I felt like the world was getting darker and darker, she was there for me."

Making sure a family has transportation to get to the hospital is just one of the things that consumes Muvdi, a former middle school math teacher who runs the Jessica June Children's Cancer Foundation. Named in honor of the 7-year-old daughter Muvdi lost to an aggressive form of leukemia, the foundation is Muvdi's passion.

"I lost my only child to cancer, and after that I heard my calling," Muvdi says. That calling, quite simply, is to reach out to South Florida families whose child has been diagnosed with this horrible, often unpredictable disease.

The stories can be heartbreaking.

There's the grandmother who works very hard in a school cafeteria in order to raise her two granddaughters, but can't keep up with even basic expenses because the oldest has cancer. Grandma loses a day of pay every week so she can take the 12-year-old for weekly chemotherapy. Desperate to keep the girls out of foster care, she needs help to pay for rent, utilities, food and gas. As if an explanation is required, she offers: "It is not easy for any grandparent to raise two grandchildren."

Then there is the family that lost their home in foreclosure when the mom had to stop working to take care of her 4-year-old daughter with leukemia. The dad works driving a taxi, but his pay is unsteady and inadequate to keep up with their expenses.

Or the single mother of three, who lost her job for taking too many days off because her 4-year-old son required multiple surgeries for a recurring brain tumor. She was desperate just for gas money to drive him to the doctor, not to mention to feed and care for her other two children.

“These families were making ends meet. They were doing fine until their child was diagnosed with cancer,” Muvdi says.

Although Muvdi can relate, this was not her experience. Muvdi had taken Jessica to the emergency room because of flu-like symptoms. Six days later, she was burying her only child. “One day she was at her friend’s birthday party, doing cartwheels. A week later she was in the hospital in a coma, and then she was gone.”

That was in 2003, and Muvdi just wanted to curl up into herself. She retreated into the loving arms of family in Colombia to grieve. But before long she came back to herself and realized she could make the experience better for others who receive the same dreaded diagnosis: “Your child has cancer.”

The Jessica June Children’s Cancer Fund was born out of Muvdi’s tragedy, yet it is the one thing that sustains her. “This gives me a purpose to go on, to keep waking up every day,” Muvdi says. “As a parent you never get over the death of a child... You learn how to live with the pain and hopefully accept and make the best of what is. JJCCF fills the void and gives me a clear purpose.”

The hardships that cancer can create is something most people don’t realize if they are fortunate enough to never find themselves in this position, Muvdi says.

“Most people understand that when a child is diagnosed with cancer, there is a medical crisis and an emotional crisis,” Muvdi says. What people don’t realize is that in many cases, there is also a financial crisis.

“If there are two parents working, one usually has to quit their job to take care of the child, to go to doctor’s appointments and treatments. If it is a single parent, it is even harder,” she says. “Who is going to pay for all the family’s needs if you can’t work? Who is going to pay the mortgage or the lease? The car payment? The electric bill and basic needs? And it just snowballs. As if dealing with cancer were not bad enough, you are losing everything in an effort to save your child.”



Above: Sandra Muvdi snuggles with Zuyani Bernal and her mom, Aida, for whom she obtained a car. Opposite page: Muvdi and her daughter, Jessica, who died at age 7 of leukemia.

In addition to offering compassion and support, the foundation gives families grants of \$1,000 in emergency financial assistance. It also works to find other resources to help families in need, calling on community support and other local resources.

Muvdi confesses there is nothing easy about what she does. “I work six days a week, from the moment I wake up to the moment I go to bed,” she says. “It’s a constant challenge to keep raising money to keep things going. Sometimes it feels like I’m in over my head, but I love what I do, and I know there is a need for what I am doing.”

All that effort has not gone unnoticed. **The Jessica June Children’s Cancer Foundation, selected as the Charity of the Year by Broward Family Life**, has earned a lot of respect. Last year, music artist Pitbull made a dream come true for of a little boy named Angel when the Cuban-American rapper accompanied the 4-year-old with a brain tumor to a fundraising dinner. This year, organizers are hoping to get Shakira to escort a little girl named Melissa to the event, scheduled for February.

For Muvdi, it’s all about making the most of every moment.

“She’s always looking for more ways to help the families,” says Bernadette Brunetti, a pediatric oncology social worker at Chris Evert Children’s Hospital in Fort Lauderdale. “It is way more personal than just handing the family a check. When they get involved with a family, they really get involved with a family.”

Brunetti has huge admiration for Muvdi and her commitment to make things better for others.

“I haven’t encountered anyone else, really, who lost a child to cancer and who is doing what she is doing,” Brunetti says. “I don’t know how she handles it, but she has even helped with funeral expenses when the families have nowhere else to turn. Having gone through it, it gives her some kind of strength to help others. Not everybody could do that. It takes a special person.”

Want to Help?

The Jessica June Children’s Cancer Foundation assists families of pediatric cancer patients at Joe DiMaggio Children’s Hospital, Chris Evert Children’s Hospital, Miami Children’s Hospital and four others in South Florida.

The foundation is always seeking partners who can assist in any way — either with donations of money, goods, or services.

For more information, call 954-712-6322 or see www.jjccf.org