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Desra Felix stands with her children, D'Nyra, 9; D'Mani, 8; and D'Nari, 3. "I went blank," said Felix, recalling her reaction on Aug. 19, 2013, when she learned D'Mani had cancer.

## After devastating diagnosis, a helping hand

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**NORTH LAUDERDALE** — The doctors continued to speak. Desra Felix did her best to assimilate the information, but her senses shut down upon hearing the word leukemia.

"I went blank," said Felix, recalling her reaction on Aug. 19, 2013, when she learned her then 7-year-old son, D'Mani, had cancer. "I couldn't hear anything else. It was a shock. You take your child in because he's not feeling well, but you're not thinking they're going to come back and tell you your child has



### Closer look

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cancer."

A week before receiving that devastating news, Felix and her three young kids moved from the U.S. Virgin Islands to South Florida. She had been a process operator at a refinery in St. Croix that closed in early 2012.

Felix arrived in South Florida planning to live with her sister's family for about a month or so, giving her time to find work and

move into her own place. The kids' father, a welder who also lost his job at the refinery, would join the family once settled.

The month at her sister's turned into a year. D'Mani's diagnosis has precluded Felix from finding work. In July, with the help of the **Jessica June Children's Cancer Foundation**, Felix was able to secure her own residence.

Based at Broward Health Medical Center, the foundation was founded in 2004 by **Sandra Muvdi** after the loss of her only child to cancer.

In addition to advocating for

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and raising awareness of childhood cancers, the foundation provides emergency financial assistance to families with children fighting the disease to ensure access to basic human necessities.

The foundation tossed Felix the life preserver she needed.

"I only had my sister, but she had to work and I basically had to do it by myself," Felix said. "I can recall being in the hospital all the time, even at the time of diagnosis, looking to my left, looking to my right and not having anybody. I felt like I was falling and I had nobody to help me."

On a cool Saturday afternoon earlier in December, Felix watched D'Mani, now 8, scamper around a playground with older sister D'Nyra, 9, and younger brother D'Nari, 3, at Hampton Pines Park in North Lauderdale. She recounted how D'Mani's initial complaints of leg pain back home in the U.S. Virgin Islands manifested into this nightmarish experience.

The boy underwent all manner of scans to determine the source of his discomfort, and the scans came back clear, Felix said. But no blood work was ordered.

Upon arriving in Florida, Felix tried to get D'Mani registered for second grade. He was so ill, she couldn't secure the required medical clearance.

"He couldn't even stand to get his height and weight [measured]," said Felix, who was advised to take D'Mani to the emergency room.

A few days later, she was told he has leukemia.

D'Mani has acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL), which, according to CureSearch for Children's Cancer, is the most common form of the disease in minors, accounting for 35 percent of all cancers in kids. Almost 3,000 new cases are diagnosed among individuals age 21 or younger every year in the United States.

Midway through a three-year chemotherapy treatment protocol, D'Mani has experienced the gamut of spirit-sapping side effects, from total hair loss to nausea and vomiting to loss of appetite. The emotional toll on the family was no less severe.

"Prayer," Felix said. "I don't know how I'm still here. There were times when I would be driving up from the hospital and my son is not awake, frail, and I could feel like I'm not in my body, but my body is driving the car."

Although leukemia robbed D'Mani of the 2013-2014 school year, he was able to enroll this year. He remains unable to partake in martial arts, which he began learning back home at age 3.

The disease also denied D'Mani the joy of Christmas last year. "He wasn't able to open any gifts," Felix said. "I was trying to get him into the spirit, but he wasn't into it. He was weak. He was frail."

"I was crying every day," she continued. "To be here and speaking without crying is progress."