

Cancer survivor looks forward to homework



AMY BETH BENNETT/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Sarita Moreno, 16, right, diagnosed a year ago with acute lymphoblastic leukemia, sits with her mother, Sara Valderrama, as they talk about the ordeal and their gratitude toward the **Jessica June Children's Cancer Foundation**.

Family benefits from June Foundation

BY LINDA TRISCHITTA
Staff writer

A year ago, Sarita Moreno and her family planned to welcome 2015 with a beach vacation.

Instead, they watched New Year fireworks from the tiny window of a hospital room, where the 15-year-old would begin receiving chemotherapy for leukemia.

And after 12 months of procedures that sometimes required Sarita to be drugged to tolerate the pain, the cancer is in remission.

"She is my hero," Sara Valderrama,



46, of Coral Springs said of her youngest child. "I have so much to be grateful and thankful for."

Sarita was very busy before acute lymphoblastic leukemia — which the National Cancer Institute website

says strikes the blood and bone marrow and is the most common type of cancer in children — put her young and ambitious life on hold.

A freshman and honors student at Coral Glades High School in the fall of 2014, Sarita played flute in the marching band and belonged to the U.S. Army Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps, her mom said.

But Sarita was always tired.

Valderrama, a human resources recruiter for City Furniture, thought her daughter's many activities were exhausting her. Results from blood tests were fine, and a doctor told her it was just a virus, she said.

But an exhausted Sarita grew pale and developed dark rings around her

See **FUND, 2B**

eyes.

"I even took her to the emergency room one day," Valderrama said. "She felt really bad and we were putting up the Christmas tree and I thought it was allergies from the tree, or maybe dust from the tree."

Sarita's symptoms matched those of other kids who filled a hospital emergency room. After tests and X-rays, she was sent home with an inhaler.

But after Sarita vomited for two hours one night, a blood test led to a transfusion and bone-marrow test, and Valderrama received news that a parent never wants to hear.

"They said it is cancer," Valderrama said. "I didn't have much time to react. My first question was, OK, what are we going to do next?"

Treatment began New Year's Day at Broward Health Medical Center in Fort Lauderdale. Sarita didn't leave her hospital room for the first three weeks of 2015, and through March, she was in the hospital more days than she was out.

"She couldn't even walk by herself, she couldn't do anything by herself," Valderrama said. "That was pretty shocking. Especially because she's always been very active and independent and athletic and doing everything by herself."

As the treatments wore on, Sarita said she felt like a baby.

"My mom had to put toothpaste on my toothbrush just so I could bring it to my mouth without getting tired," Sarita said. "Powerlessness was the worst part. It was the same for my family, seeing them suffer, and I couldn't do anything about it."

On the days she had an appetite, brothers Andres Moreno, 20, a college student, and Rene Moreno, 24, a Florida National Guard soldier who works in customer service for City Furniture, fetched foods that she craved. When she was most vulnerable, they had to wear face masks in the house.

The family's strict budget was tested.

"There is no way to anticipate the bills that will come," Valderrama said. "If my daughter needs a new mattress because her back is hurting from hundreds of lumbar punctures, I will get it because that is my priority. As a parent, you do whatever it takes. But some things get left behind. And that is where **Jessica June** has helped us."

The **Jessica June Children's Cancer Foundation** in Fort Lauderdale has assisted about 800 children in its 11 years, said Sandra Muvdi, founder and president. Its goal is preventing homelessness that can happen when medical emergencies arise.

"A child with the disease requires a full-time caregiver," Muvdi said.

And that can mean job loss. But Valderrama says she was lucky: City Furniture gave her a laptop so she could work remotely while also taking her daughter to chemotherapy treatments.

The **Jessica June Children's Cancer Foundation** is supported through the Sun Sentinel Children's Fund, a **McCormick Foundation Fund**, which benefits South Florida nonprofit organizations that help local families and children in need.

The **Children's Fund** grant to the foundation helped Valderrama pay rent. Her electricity provider, car insurer and medical vendors also received checks from the **Jessica June Children's Cancer Foundation**.

"If I didn't have the **Jessica June Foundation's** help ... I didn't know what I was going to do," Valderrama said.

Social workers refer families to the foundation named for Muvdi's daughter, who was 7 when leukemia took her life in 2003.

"That was my only child," said Muvdi. "I am actually channeling my pain and grief into helping other families in need, in my daughter's memory. It actually makes me very happy to know the outcome of that tragedy has been converted into something positive for our community and for me."

Valderrama called Muvdi's work "noble."

Muvdi said as more hospital social workers apply to the foundation on behalf of sick kids, its pool of funds to help families is stretched.

"We're giving each family that qualifies \$1,000 for bills for basic human needs," Muvdi said. "We wish we could give them \$2,000."

At Valderrama's apartment, HOPE is spelled out in mirrored letters.

Come Jan. 4, Sarita, now 16, will return to high school. She is even looking forward to tackling homework with friends, and is doing breathing exercises so that she can play flute again.

And while she is a bit afraid that school will be "a germ factory ... I still miss it," Sarita said. "I want to go back."

Despite the year of life-threatening illness, mother and daughter described positive outcomes.

"I learned not to underestimate the kindness of other people," said Sarita, who met some of the corporate donors to the foundation that supported her family. "I didn't think there were strangers who cared and wanted to help."

Her mother, fiercely independent since her divorce 12 years ago, said she has learned to rely on others, and felt embraced by work colleagues and the community at large.

"For me, it helped me to be a little more humble, that I need help sometimes," Valderrama said. "For Sarita, the finish line is a year away, after another year of treatment. Of course I am very positive. I just know she is going to be fine, and trust God that she is going to be OK."