



## Free to Give: Meet Sandra Muvdi

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*The following interview is part of Philanthropy Roundtable's "Free to Give" series highlighting the impact that philanthropy can have when Americans have the right to give freely to the causes and communities they care about most. Learn more here.*

"I created the Jessica June Children's Cancer Foundation 17 years ago, after I lost my only child to cancer. After my life took that sharp turn, I dedicated myself to the Foundation's mission in supporting families fighting childhood cancer."

"I spoke to many hospital social workers about the multiple crises and needs families face after being told their child has cancer. Throughout the crisis, social workers unanimously expressed what families needed most was emergency financial assistance to cover their basic human necessities."

"So, that's exactly what I focused on. Over the past 17 years, the organization has been providing emergency financial assistance and supportive care services for families who have a child diagnosed with cancer. We help them have access to basic needs such as housing, electricity and food while they face multiple crises."

"When we help a child fighting cancer, we are helping and supporting the entire family. When a child is diagnosed, everyone in that family is going through the crisis."

"Last year alone, we supported 440 children and family members fighting childhood cancer. Since we first began our nonprofit, we've assisted more than 5,600 individuals."

"The families initially face a medical and emotional crisis when they are told their child has cancer, often followed by a financial crisis – they're at risk of losing their home, they don't have food to put on the table, they're going to lose electricity or their car, the list goes on."

"Most of the time, a parent has to become a full-time caregiver, so they're faced with possibly losing their job or having to move in with grandparents. We mostly receive applications in the initial stage, when families have to adjust all their spending and are only beginning to figure out how they're going to navigate this journey – that on average is two years long."

"We're headquartered in Fort Lauderdale and serve the entire state of Florida, but the bulk of our applications come from south Florida hospitals treating pediatric oncology. There's a lot of need in the region, and we see a variety of situations here that many other states might not. In addition to regular U.S. citizens who fall into financial crisis, we see many migrant workers and farmers who may not be documented and have been here for years, or maybe their kids are born here but their parents aren't."

"The general population has been impacted by COVID-19, but the already-vulnerable population we serve has been hit especially hard over the last year and a half. With in-person events on pause, we had to quickly figure out how to fundraise at not just the level of previous years, but raise more to meet the increase in demand for our programs."

"The campaigns we developed have been a really important component to supplementing the funds we were missing out on, and some of these donations are coming from donor-advised funds. It is important for us to have donor-advised funds as an option, and that it remains an option for donors to be able to direct their funds to our campaigns in such a way."

"A big portion of what we do is emergency financial assistance, and that is what we've been doing since day one, since the Foundation was created. With COVID-19, the situation has become very pronounced. It's been more of an emergency than ever."

"Donor-advised funds have really come through for these families who need emergency financial assistance, that have also been impacted by COVID – whether by loss of income, or by COVID itself, in the family and even in the child who's fighting cancer."

"Our Frontline Rapid Response Fund began in April on the heels of the pandemic. The support we received during that time period really saved us. We received the support of donor-advised fund gifts, notably through the Community Foundation of Broward. That was a big reason for the success of our campaign, and it made a large impact for the families we support."

"We also have something called the 'Advocacy Program,' which is for the families who have the most extreme cases and are in the direst need. They don't have anywhere else to knock, and that's when we let the whole world know their story."

"One story is of a little one-year-old baby who was fighting leukemia and waiting for a lifesaving bone marrow transplant. The baby got COVID-19 while fighting cancer. Her father lost his job – he was an undocumented immigrant – and he couldn't provide for his family. He took poison to try and take his own life. The mother was illiterate and didn't even have a car."

"The father made it through, which is a miracle in itself. Then the little baby girl made it through COVID-19 and got her bone marrow transplant. She's back home and the family is back on their feet."

"We started supporting this family in August through our Advocacy Program, helping them with everything from rent to food, phone, internet and utilities. We received many important donations to help support them and it's been incredible to see that family of five survive multiple crises and come out of it in one piece."

"There are so many stories like that one, and we work to reach as many families in need as possible. We've raised over \$4 million in our organization's lifespan and received a 100 out of 100 Impact & Results score from Charity Navigator – their highest score. That is something I'm very proud of."

"It has been such a deeply rewarding experience for me to walk alongside these families when they're most in need."

*-Sandra Muvdi, founder and president of The Jessica June Children's Cancer Foundation in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.*