

Turning Grief Into Hope

A spray of sunflowers arranged in a vase adorns the dining table, a bright but poignant reminder of the approaching anniversary. On the wall nearby, pictures of a smiling, vibrant-eyed boy that capture the two short years of his life are displayed behind plastic in a homemade memorial.

“The five-year anniversary of his passing is tomorrow,” says his mother, Kim Forsythe, “and it’s very easy for us to start thinking about that and feeling horrible. But that’s not helping anybody.”

Instead, the Club Member awoke at 5 a.m. that summer morning, turned on her computer in the Yoyogi Uehara house that she shares with her husband, Mark Ferris, and their 9-year-old daughter, Natalie, and spent a few hours working on an upcoming fundraiser for the Tyler Foundation, the charity started by the couple after Tyler’s death.

“We didn’t know that we were starting a foundation until we started one,” says Mark, 43, seated beside his wife, whom he married in 2000 after meeting her at a toastmaster event in Tokyo. “We thought, ‘Let’s raise some money and give something back to commemorate his life.’”

When Tyler was born in 2003, Kim knew quickly that something was wrong. The newborn didn’t feed as much as his sister had done, he slept too much and his complexion was pale. In spite of reassurances, she took

Following the death of their son, one couple’s charitable work is changing the way hospitals in Japan care for children with cancer.

by Wendi Hailey



Kim Forsythe and Mark Ferris

Irwin Wong



Kim and Tyler

him in early for a checkup when he was three and a half weeks old. The doctor suspected anemia

and sent him to the hospital for tests on a Saturday afternoon, while Natalie and Mark were off playing together.

“The attendee just took one look at him and said, ‘Your child has cancer,’” recalls Kim. “It was not even on the radar of what was in the field of possible ailments. I didn’t even know babies could get cancer. I still can’t get my head around it. I’m still angry.”

As many as 3,000 children are diagnosed with cancer each year in Japan. Most forms of leukemia have an 80 to 85 percent cure rate. Tyler, however, had the highly aggressive infant leukemia.

Over the succeeding months, Tyler endured a bone marrow transplant, intensive therapies and a string of infections as Mark and Kim battled through the facets of grief and reconstructed their lives around the pediatric oncology ward of a Setagaya Ward hospital. “He was always happy and smiling,” Kim, 45, says. “It was amazing. Everyone imagines that kids in the hospital are sad and sick, but these kids are lively and happy.”

The Tyler Foundation concentrates on aspects of patient and parent support that Kim found lacking during that period, such as an on-staff psychologist, support groups and childcare for siblings. It also has introduced a therapy dog, beads of courage, which are designed to empower the children, and other programs that have proven successful in other countries.

“Cancer in Japan is still a very, very bad word,” says Kim, a Pennsylvania native. “Pediatric cancer is about as scary as it gets for a lot of parents. They don’t even want to tell anyone, their family, friends, sometimes even the child that they have cancer.”

But a more open acceptance seems to have taken root, and the programs are spreading to hospitals throughout the country. One doctor had sent an e-mail to Kim earlier that June day to say the bead program was “magic.”

“We thought maybe it’d just be at one hospital doing one small little bit to make life better, and that would’ve been achieving our goal when we started,” says Kim.

“We had a track record where we

had succeeded in projects and we thought, ‘Hey, we can do more here,’” adds Mark. “And we are talking now in

terms of fundamentally changing the way patients’ care is administered throughout Japan in the pediatric oncology wards.”

In the months that followed Tyler’s death, the couple began planning a small fundraiser that grew to three days of major events. An avid cricket player from Zimbabwe, Mark witnessed a friendly match turn into a celebrity event with 12 professional players flying in from five countries. A formal ball drew 350 attendees, and the weekend concluded with a golf outing. It was this generous outpouring from friends, colleagues and strangers that led them to a more long-term mindset and lightened their anguish.

“It was Mark who said, ‘Let’s do this. Let’s start a foundation,’” says Kim, who serves as president of the organization and does freelance voiceover work, while Mark oversees various enterprises. “I was quite distraught. It wasn’t until we started getting involved in planning our first fundraiser...it was what got me out of my gloom.”

Instead of putting as much distance as possible between themselves and the children’s oncology wards, they constantly share Tyler’s story and have contact with hospitals. They have learned not to project their feelings onto those families, but in some instances the sting remains fresh.

“I do go to the hospital a lot,” says Kim. “I hate driving there. I hate going there. I hate looking at Tyler’s room. I hate seeing the nurses that I used to know. It’s very hard to, even though I’m there doing positive things, it’s very hard not to think, ‘I’ve been here.’ So I don’t know when that goes away.”

After commemorating the somber anniversary and taking a family vacation, approaching fundraising events, from the annual gala in October to a spring marathon, will require their attention.

“It’s kept me busy and it’s kept me focused on the goals that are ahead,” says Mark. “There’s a lot to be said of making something positive out of it, and I think that’s what we tell ourselves. His life ended there, but this is part of the cause.” □

Tyler Foundation

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