



The Vannie E. Cook Jr.

CHILDREN'S CANCER AND HEMATOLOGY CLINIC



Vol. 1, No. 2

Fall 2003

Community Support Enables Cancer Clinic To Treat All Children

The need for The Vannie E. Cook Jr. Children's Cancer and Hematology Clinic becomes more obvious every day, and the South Texas community continues to come forward to make sure these youngsters get the care they need right here at home.

Since opening in June of 2001, the clinic staff has taken care of more than 1,100 young patients.

"What we are most proud of is that we have not had to turn one child away – even those without insurance or the financial means to pay for services," said Dr. C. Kenneth Landrum, Chair of the Board of the Vannie E. Cook Jr. Cancer Foundation. "We are committed to this level of service, but we would not be successful without support from the community."

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Dr. C. Kenneth Landrum



So far this year, more than 60 organizations and 40 individuals have contributed to the clinic. Each gift has made a difference to the level of services the clinic has been able to provide. The Houston Endowment is giving the clinic a total of \$450,000 to support staff salaries over the next three years. The Bassett family of Houston covered the cost of outfitting a procedure room at the clinic, and suggested it be called "Visiones de Esperanza."

Al Ragusin and his "dancing Spanish horses" performed at a special benefit event for the clinic, which also included performances by the David Garcia Band, and Sonia Chapa's Flamenco Dancers Spectacular. Many community organizations sponsored parties at the clinic for the patients and their families.

The \$17.54 Club continues to be a success in the community. Started by the Oratory Academy, other schools have now joined the cause. The club was formed in response to the gift of a young child of his life savings—\$17.54—to the clinic to help kids with cancer. His gift inspired others, and the

(continued on page 2)

Family Bonds in Battle

Selma Wahdwani, a mother of four, decided to see a plastic surgeon in May of 2000 to get an unsightly bump removed from her neck. He took one look and referred her to a specialist. The diagnosis – cancer.

"I was shocked, I said, 'No way.' I exercise, I don't smoke, I'm a vegetarian. I asked for another doctor," she said. "Yes, I had been feeling a little tired, but I have four kids, of course I'm tired. I certainly didn't think something was wrong with me."

But the diagnosis of Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma was confirmed. She traveled to Houston for chemotherapy treatment. After the first course of treatment, she relapsed and

had a second round. Then, with cancer she received a stem cell transplant in 2001. Finally, in March 2002, at her check-up, the physicians gave her the good news – she was in remission, everything looked great.

Thirteen days later, her 5-year-old son was diagnosed with leukemia.

"It was the worst day of my life. No matter what they had done to me, nothing could be worse. Here I was, in remission, and the treatment was so fresh in my mind. I prayed to God, 'Please let me trade places. Please let me come out of



Shown in this 2002 holiday card are the Wadhwani family: Sunil and Selma, with children Sarina, Sameer, Sabreena and Satash.

remission and Satash be OK. Please.' For five days, I cried, I didn't even drink a drop of water during that time."

(continued on page 4)

Art Program Empowers Young Patients

By Allison Bassett

Two years ago, Dr. David Poplack, the director of Texas Children's Cancer Center, asked me if I would consider going down the next summer to McAllen to start up the Arts in Medicine (AIM) Program at The Vannie E. Cook Jr. Children's Cancer and Hematology Clinic. I accepted and last summer, the summer of 2002, I went to McAllen to work at the clinic. I was immediately struck by the sense of family that existed in the clinic. The children knew and loved the staff. The clinic was definitely a place where the children felt at home, but it was clear that any added resources would greatly help.

It was so wonderful to see the change that the Arts and Medicine program brought to the clinic. The clinic was already a family, but this program made the clinic a fun place to visit. It provided an outlet for the children's creative side. So often when a child is struck with cancer, he or she ends up feeling lost and powerless. Every day it seems, others are making decisions for them. Children often have to deal with having little or no say in what happens to them. The frustration that this causes is even worse when the decisions are about their life, their health, the next treatment they will undergo. The AIM Program provides a haven for the children, a place where all the decisions are theirs. They choose what type of art they want to do, how they want to do it, and whether they even participate at all.

The AIM Program is a place where the children's decisions are respected.

The AIM Program also provides a refuge from the reality of cancer. It is a place for both the patients and their siblings. Within the program we don't ask whether or not a child is a patient because it doesn't matter. There the children are simply children; they are all on an equal playing field. No one is



Allison Bassett, right, with her mother, Claire Bassett, accepting a gift from the children of the clinic. Allison began the Arts In Medicine Program at the clinic during the summer of 2002. The Bassett family made a donation to the clinic to completely outfit a procedure room.

given special treatment, and no one is ignored. Often siblings can end up feeling unloved or overlooked as the patient becomes the center of attention. In the AIM Program, patients and siblings are viewed as equally affected by cancer and equally in need of an outlet for their creativity.

On the more practical side, it gives them something to do while waiting for their sibling's appointment to be over. It also gives tired, worn out parents a break. Between constantly worrying about the child who is the patient, trying to entertain and pay attention to the other children, and dealing with the normal, everyday chores and issues, parents can break down. The AIM Program gives the parents a break, time to just sit, breathe, and maybe read a book or the newspaper.

The clinic is an absolutely wonderful place, but it desperately needs resources. It allows the children of South Texas to stay at home to receive treatment. Many of the patients the clinic treats are those without insurance because the clinic staff turns no one away. They provide treatment to any child in need. Each new toy, new piece of equipment, every new addition to the clinic makes

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(continued from page 1)



Al Ragusin and his "dancing Spanish horses" performed at a benefit for the clinic.

students at Oratory issued a challenge to other Student Councils in South Texas.

"The Vannie Cook Clinic is a special place, and anyone who walks through the doors sees the tremendous care that these children receive," said Dr. Landrum. "Not only is there access to the finest medical care available, but the emotional support given to these kids and their families—at such a difficult time—is apparent every day."★

a difference. The closer they can stay to home the easier it is on them. As the clinic expands, it provides better and better care for the children. This clinic is truly a blessing to the children of South Texas.

Allison is an 18-year-old freshman at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. She has been an active volunteer in programs at Texas Children's Hospital and Texas Children's Cancer Center.★

Friends of The Vannie E. Cook Jr. Children's Clinic

We express our appreciation to the following friends of the Vannie E. Cook Jr. Children's Clinic who have made contributions this past year.

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Yes, I would like to help children in the Valley with cancer!

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Vannie E. Cook Jr. Children's Cancer and Hematology Clinic
101 West Expressway 83
McAllen, Texas 78503
956-661-9840

Mom, Son Battle Cancer *(continued from page 1)*

Two and a half years later, Satesh, a patient of the Vannie E. Cook Jr. Children's Cancer Clinic, is doing fine. His treatment for acute lymphoid leukemia is going very well and he's making high marks in the first grade.

His mom is back in Houston on a new round of treatment, feeling confident that the bone marrow transplant she had in June will get rid of her cancer for good.

"I'm doing wonderful, Satesh is doing wonderful," she said.

For the Wahdwani family, the last few years have been a roller coaster. Selma had to live in Houston for months at a time to receive her cancer treatments. Her husband, Sunil, and mother, looked after the children in McAllen.

When Satesh received his cancer diagnosis, he at first was treated in Houston, but he missed the familiar surroundings of home. On one appointment, he would

not even go inside the hospital.

Since opening in June of 2001, the Vannie Cook Clinic allows youngsters to get all their treatments locally in McAllen, avoiding the hardship of long travel and months away from home.

Selma still cries when she thinks about the day Satesh was diagnosed. And she marvels at how her other three children – Sarina, 14; Sameer, 12, and Sabreena, 10 – have coped with the events of the last few years.

Now, Selma says she has spent some time thinking about what she would do if offered the chance to live these last three and a half years over. To have all of this go away. I decided, "I wouldn't change it."

"I realize this has helped all of us. I have changed. My husband and family – we've all changed. We love each other more. We're much closer. No, I wouldn't go back."★



The staff of the Vannie E. Cook Jr. Children's Cancer and Hematology Clinic includes: seated from left, Dr. Juan Carlos Bernini, Medical Director; Laura Martinez Ilgun, Director of Development and Public Relations; Dr. Rodrigo Erana. Standing: Deborah Garcia, Administrative Coordinator; Janie Avila, R.N.; Dalinda Garcia, Medical Assistant; and Jaime Rodriguez, R.N.

Happenings:

Continuing Ed Courses Offered

A monthly series of nursing and allied health continuing education courses are offered at The Vannie Cook Clinic using telecommunications technology.

Texas Children's Hospital and The Learning Academy coordinate the monthly video conferences, on topics related to pediatrics.

For more information, call Laura Martinez Ilgun at 956-661-9840 or The Learning Academy at 832-824-2462.

ExxonMobile Makes Newsletter Possible

The Exxon/Mobile Foundation provided a grant to the Vannie E. Cook Jr. Children's Cancer and Hematology Clinic to pay the cost of producing and distributing the newsletter.

The foundation also supported the clinic by providing a summer intern through the 2003 ExxonMobil Community Summer Jobs Program.

Baylor College of Medicine

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