



The Vannie E. Cook Jr.

CHILDREN'S CANCER AND HEMATOLOGY CLINIC

BCM
Baylor College of Medicine


Texas Children's Hospital

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Summer/Fall 2010

Celebration of Heroes

Collaboration to Fight Childhood Cancer Marks 10 Years

When people picture their idea of a hero, they often conjure images of firemen, policemen, or even fictional characters like Superman. But at the Vannie E. Cook Cancer Clinic, heroes of another sort were recently celebrated—real life heroes who are battling childhood cancer as patients, doctors and members of the community who support the clinic.

These heroes were recognized at a luncheon at the McAllen Country Club May 3 that commemorated the 10th anniversary of the partnership between the Vannie E. Cook Jr. Cancer Foundation, Baylor College of Medicine and Texas Children's Hospital to establish the clinic in the Rio Grande Valley.

The Vannie Cook Clinic opened its doors in 2001 and has served more than 5,000 patients in South Texas. Without this facility, patients and their families would have to travel to Houston, San Antonio or elsewhere for treatment.

The luncheon was chaired by Dr. Kenneth Landrum, who serves as chair of the Vannie Cook Foundation, his wife, Carolyn; and Kathy Collins, vice chair of the foundation, and her husband, Jim.

“Let us all remember that childhood cancer remains the number one cause of non-accidental death of children in the U.S. and the number of new cases encountered in our Clinic each year is staggering,” Landrum said.

Two young Vannie Cook patients, Lourdes Reyna and Nick Peters, presented the Landrums and Collins with hand-made plaques in appreciation of their commitment to supporting pediatric cancer over the years.

Also speaking at the event were Dr. David Poplack, professor of pediatrics at Baylor College of Medicine and director of the

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Lourdes Reyna and Nick Peters, both patients at the Vannie Cook Children's Clinic, presented plaques to several of the speakers at the Celebration of Heroes luncheon.



Honorary chairs of the luncheon were Jim and Kathy Collins and Dr. Ken Landrum and his wife, Carolyn.



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Grants Provide Critical Patient Assistance

The Vannie E. Cook Jr. Cancer Foundation has received generous financial support that will help provide life-saving treatment to young patients at the Vannie Cook Children's Cancer Clinic and assist patients and their families with basic needs. The funds have come from the City of McAllen Community Development Block Grants (CDBG), the CPRIT Foundation and Houston Children's Charity.

CDBG/City of McAllen

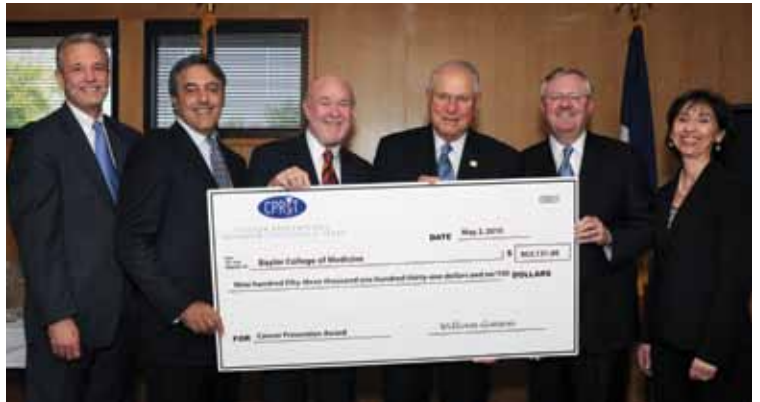
CDBG funds improve and enhance the quality of life for citizens of McAllen, with emphasis on low-income people in the city. Since 2004, CDBG/City of McAllen has awarded the Vannie Cook Cancer Foundation more than \$150,000 to provide chemotherapy and other life-saving care and treatment for low-income children from McAllen.

"Chemotherapy often offers the only hope for children with cancer, but it also carries one of the largest costs associated with pediatric cancer treatment—a cost that most people, even under the best economic circumstances, would have difficulty paying without some assistance," said Laura Martinez Ilgun, executive director of the Vannie Cook Foundation. "Our facility is very fortunate to have such generous support from CDBG and the City of McAllen to help us address the challenges of providing treatment for the many low-income children of our community."

CPRIT

While chemotherapy is one of the largest expenses of cancer treatment, patients' families often struggle with other basic needs and financial issues while their child is undergoing treatment.

The Cancer Prevention and Research Institute of Texas (CPRIT) has awarded the Vannie Cook Cancer Foundation a grant of \$2,800 to assist patients and their families of the Vannie Cook Clinic with transportation, lodging, meals, rent and utilities assistance. The funding is made possible from proceeds from the sale of the Texans Conquer Cancer specialty license plates.



CPRIT representatives, including Jimmy Mansour, the organization's Oversight Committee chairman, second from left, present a grant to Dr. David Poplack, director of the Texas Children's Cancer Center, and Dr. Kenneth Landrum, chair of the Vannie E. Cook Jr. Cancer Foundation, center.

Texas voters overwhelmingly approved a constitutional amendment in 2007 establishing CPRIT to accelerate research that will bring science closer to finding a cure for cancer. Coinciding with that research, CPRIT strives to recruit more top scientists to bring their efforts to Texas, develop consumer drugs to treat cancer and, in the process, create more job opportunities in the state. Additionally, CPRIT is focused on advancing prevention methods that will help make screenings accessible to more Texans so that cancers can be detected early.

CPRIT hopes that one day we can talk about cancer the same way we now talk about polio.

"CPRIT is pleased to present this patient support services award to the Vannie E. Cook Jr. Cancer Foundation," said Jimmy Mansour, CPRIT's oversight committee chairman. "Our goal in supporting such programs is to assist cancer patients and their families in the fight against cancer, providing support services that will help improve their quality of life."

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Celebration of Heroes

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Texas Children's Cancer Center in Houston, Dr. Juan Carlos Bernini, medical director of the Vannie Cook Clinic, and several local legislators.

In addition, pediatric cancer survivor Adrian Vela and his parents spoke about their experience at the Vannie Cook Children's Clinic.

The Vannie Cook Foundation provides resources for cancer treatment, research, cancer genetics and education in the Rio Grande Valley. Its goal is to ensure that local children who suffer from cancer and blood diseases receive the most up-to-date care and treatment without the need to leave the region and regardless of ability to pay.



Dr. Leonel Vela; his wife Alicia and their son Adrian are pictured with Dr. Juan Carlos Bernini, medical director of the Vannie Cook Children's Clinic.

Volunteering Is a Family Affair for Mother-Daughter Duo

For Jenny Hollis and Carol Anne Dixon, volunteering is a family affair. The mother-daughter duo is actively involved at the Vannie E. Cook Jr. Children's Cancer Clinic and the Vannie E. Cook Jr. Cancer Foundation.

Their work there began about five years ago, when Jenny, a photographer, started volunteering her time and skills by taking portraits of the young patients with Santa Claus. She recruited her mother, who joined the board of the Vannie Cook Foundation, which supports the clinic.

The two have never looked back and, in fact, have found ways to get even more involved. Both draw inspiration from the patients and their families.

"After I became a board member, every time I walked through the lobby I felt a desire to be more personally connected with the patients and their families, so I found more ways to volunteer," Dixon said.

Carol Ann is a regular volunteer with the Clinic's Arts In Medicine Program, which is designed to provide a creative outlet of expression for both the young patients and their siblings.

"Many patients spend considerable time commuting to McAllen for care and waiting at the clinic for treatment; therefore, the opportunity to paint tiles and make pinwheels or a bracelet with their mom's name on it is special. It is a joy to watch reluctance, hesitation and shyness replaced by laughter for the patients and their families. One smile by a patient is such a gigantic reward," Dixon said.

Hollis still takes Santa pictures, and now also donates the services of her company, Jenny Hollis Photography, at other clinic events.

She recalls one of the first portraits she took of a patient. "A little girl was dressed in her Christmas colors with a pink crochet hat covering her tiny bare head, and in her little bitty hands was a list for Santa. We encouraged her to open it and read it to Santa, as she sat in his lap. She didn't ask for new Barbie dolls, or game systems or new shoes or a puppy dog.



Carol Anne Dixon, left, and her daughter Jenny Hollis are both volunteers at the Vannie Cook Children's Clinic.

She asked for good health. I went home that night and hugged my children longer and harder than I think I ever had before. From that night on, I knew why I was there and involved with this beautiful place."

The mother and daughter are also inspired by the doctors, nurses and staff at the clinic and recognize the importance of the facility to the region.

"The value of having the clinic in South Texas is priceless," Dixon said. "The devotion and quality care of the physicians, nurses and staff to fight and cure pediatric cancer is foremost. Without the clinic here, travel time would increase and financial obligations for the families would be multiplied. There is a huge difference when children are able to go home at night for quality family time."

Golf Tourney Benefits Vannie Cook Clinic

Year after year civic-minded golfers gear up for the annual Rio Grande Valley Cancer Classic Golf Tournament at the McAllen Country Club. The event, which started in 1978, has raised nearly \$2 million to help children and adults in the Valley in their fight against cancer. A portion of the proceeds have benefited the Vannie Cook Children's Clinic, including \$15,000 donated last year. Pictured at right are Laura Martinez Ilgun, Vannie Cook Clinic director of development, Craig Blackwell and Ronnie Tavarez, RGV Cancer Classic, Dr. Juan Carlos Bernini, medical director of the Vannie Cook Clinic, and Dr. Ken Landrum, chairman of the Vannie E. Cook Jr. Cancer Foundation.



Vannie Cook Clinic Serves as Training Site for Students

The Vannie E. Cook Jr. Cancer Clinic has become an important part of the health care available in the Rio Grande Valley. Since opening its doors in 2001, the clinic has treated more than 5,000 patients, keeping them and their parents from having to travel out of the region for life-saving treatment.

But the clinic has left its mark in another way that many people likely are not aware of. It serves as a significant part of the training for many people in the Valley who are pursuing careers in medicine.

Medical students from the University of Texas Health Science Center San Antonio Regional Academic Health Center complete a rotation at the Vannie Cook Clinic, and it also serves as a training site for nursing students from the South Texas College.

"These activities fulfill our educational mission as part of an academic institution," said Dr. Rodrigo Eraña, a physician at the Vannie Cook Clinic and assistant professor of pediatrics – hematology/oncology at Baylor College

of Medicine. "It's an important part of improving the care we provide patients and the community."

Sandra Fiscal, R.N., completed the nursing program at South Texas College and is now a nurse at the Vannie Cook Clinic. She said she received valuable experience there that she may not have elsewhere.

"I was given the opportunity to learn about different types of venous lines, how to access them and why they are used," Fiscal said. "Training here also showed me about illness and how it affects family life and its dynamics."

What's more, Fiscal said that because of her experience, she also decided that pediatric oncology was the branch of nursing in which she wanted to work.

Joanne Edwards, R.N., is on the nursing faculty at South Texas College. She is full of praise for the training students get at the clinic.

"It really helps them with their overall education," Edwards said. "They are given a lot of one-on-one education



Clinic nurse supervisor Jaime Rodriguez is pictured with nurse Sandy Fiscal, who trained and now works at the Vannie Cook Children's Clinic.

by the nurses and doctors. After the rotation there, they seem to have a better understanding of dealing with difficult and emotional situations, family dynamics and cultural considerations."

Grants support important treatment and services

(continued from page 2)

Houston Children's Charity

Another organization has stepped up to help with patient's needs and to improve their experience while at the clinic for treatment and appointments.

Houston Children's Charity made a generous donation to help support emergency patient needs at the Vannie Cook Clinic and gave a truck load of new toys in honor of Dr. David Poplack, professor of pediatrics – hematology/oncology at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston who also oversees the operations of the Vannie Cook Clinic. Poplack is on the Advisory Board of Houston Children's Charity.

The nonprofit organization is dedicated to improving the quality of life for Greater Houston's underprivileged, abused and disabled children who have been otherwise left behind. Its goal is to leave no legitimate request for assistance unanswered. This year the nonprofit decided to extend its support to children in south Texas.

"This is an extraordinary gift from an extraordinary organization," Poplack said. "Houston Children's Charity is a model charity that truly cares about all children. I am so pleased that, through this donation, they have recognized the needs of the young patients in the Rio Grande Valley being treated at the Vannie Cook Clinic."

By holding Christmas toy distributions and other events, Houston Children's Charity helps disadvantaged children expand their awareness and experience some of the joys of life.



Boxes of toys donated by Houston Children's Charity are unloaded at the Vannie Cook Children's Clinic.

'Cancer Bell' Celebrates the End of Treatment

Anna Reeves knows what it's like to undergo cancer treatment. The two-time cancer survivor has been through radiation twice as well as chemotherapy and physical therapy. So she knows full well the joy and relief of finishing treatment.

Each time she concluded treatment she rang a bell provided by the treatment facility to commemorate the event. The ritual was simple, yet powerful.

Reeves wanted young patients at the Vannie Cook Children's Clinic to have the same experience, so she donated a bell.

"It is similar to celebrating a birthday in a restaurant, and the staff comes and sings and everyone hears. Everyone feels the joy," Reeves said. "Children and adults alike love ringing that bell."

David Melaas, whose son Jordan just completed treatment, certainly loved hearing the peal of the bell. "It's been a long road. Seeing Jordan ring that bell signifies the end of a very difficult journey and the start of a new chapter. There are no words to describe it. We won the battle!" he said.

Jordan was also presented with a hockey stick from a Killer Bees hockey player that said, "Congrats on beating the toughest opponent."

Jordan's mom, Angie Melaas, said her son and other patients have been waiting to ring the bell to signify the end of treatment ever since it was installed at the clinic.

There's nothing like ringing the bell, Reeves said, and knowing "I am done, and I am a survivor."



Jordan Melaas rings the bell at the conclusion of his chemotherapy with parents David and Angie looking on.

Ways to Give

Individuals or organizations interested in giving to the Vannie E. Cook Jr. Children's Cancer and Hematology Clinic or the Vannie E. Cook Jr. Cancer Foundation may make a donation of:

- An immediate gift of cash, by check or credit card
- A pledge of multi-year commitment
- A monthly donation
- A gift of stock or other assets
- A gift in tribute – memorials, honoraria, birthdays or anniversaries
- A planned gift – bequests, charitable gift annuities, trusts of life insurance
- A gift-in-kind or gift of your time

For more information contact Laura Martinez Ilgun at 956-661-9840 or go to www.vanniecook.org or www.vanniecookchildrensclinic.org.

Clinic and Foundation Donations

We express our appreciation to all of our friends and supporters and to the following whose donations and pledges over \$100 were made during the period of July 1, 2009 to June 30, 2010. We also extend deepest gratitude for the many gifts and in-kind donations that bring joy to our patients.

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