



The Vannie E. Cook Jr.

CHILDREN'S CANCER AND HEMATOLOGY CLINIC

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Guerra Family Helps with New Chemotherapy Unit

The Guerra family knows firsthand the hardships of having a child in the family with cancer. In 1994, when Zacarias Guerra was just 3 years old, he was diagnosed with leukemia. For several years, Zack and his parents, Gerry and Ann, had to make many trips to San Antonio for his care and treatment. At that time, there was not a local children's cancer treatment facility in the Valley.

"Having a facility back then, like the Vannie Cook Clinic, would have definitely helped us during those very difficult years. A pediatric facility really does make a big difference in the quality of care for the afflicted child," said Gerry Guerra.

Because of their experiences, the Guerras have given a gift of \$100,000 to the Vannie E. Cook Jr. Children's Cancer and Hematology Clinic.

"We are so glad that now local children with cancer can stay at home and be close to their family and friends where they need to be. Fighting cancer is tough enough, staying close to home makes it a little bit easier, if that is possible," he said.

A pioneer ranching family, the Guerra's share a legacy of community



Seated: Mr. and Mrs. Rafael A. and Carmen Guerra; Middle: Mrs. Carmen Elvia Yzaguirre; Back: Carlos X. Guerra, Geraldo L. Guerra, A.R. "Felo" Guerra and Hector M. Guerra

service that was started by Rafael A. and Carmen Guerra and continues with their five children and many grandchildren. Their generous gift will help

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Nine-year-old Meets Challenges of Cancer with Determination and Great Spirit



Daniela Villarreal and her mother Dolly

By Dipali Pathak

Daniela Villarreal is a bright 9-year-old who, as her mother describes, has a certain aura that draws people to her. Her strength and tremendous spirit have kept her hopes up during her fight against leukemia.

Daniela was diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia in October of 2003 when she was 7-years-old, and the Villarreal family's life has been a roller coaster ride ever since. The diagnosis was a complete shock to the family, but the challenges have not changed Daniela's confidence and plans for the future.

Because the Villarreals live in Rio Grande City, a small city in the Valley, they were afraid that they would have to drive for hours to a major city in order for Daniela to get treatment. "I didn't even know about the clinic in McAllen," says mother Dolly about the Vannie E. Cook Jr. Children's Cancer and Hematology Clinic.

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Social Worker Tackles Cancer as Issue for the Entire Family

The introduction of a social worker into the multidisciplinary team approach at the Vannie E. Cook Jr. Children's Cancer and Hematology Clinic was clearly the next step in the clinic's desire to ease the burden of childhood cancer in children, families, and the community.

Stefany Levrier Gonzales joined the clinic in December. She earned her bachelor's in social work at The University of Texas at Austin after which she pursued her licensure at the bachelor's level. She received her master's of science in social work at The University of Texas Pan American at Edinburg in 2003 and became a licensed master of social work shortly thereafter. She has eight



Stefany Levrier Gonzales joined the Vannie E. Cook Clinic in December.

years of experience and has worked in varying fields of social work from case management to oncology social work and has worked with an array of populations including children, teens, families, and cancer survivors and their caregivers.

"It is clear that cancer does not only impact a patient's medical well-being but the emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being of an entire family," she said. "A family-centered approach to working with patients and their

families is key, as the coping abilities and strategies of the parents and siblings often impact the perspective and experience of the child with cancer."

The much-needed position is funded by a donor who wished to remain anonymous.

Young Adults in Community Form "Friends for Hope" To Raise Funds

Young adults in the Rio Grande Valley who are motivated to make a difference in their community have established Friends for Hope at the Vannie E. Cook Jr. Children's Cancer and Hematology Clinic to do just that.



Left to right. Cindy Disque, Laura Ilgun, Will Collins, Blake Box, Tricia Patton, Brianne Baumeister and Carlos Santos

A group of young adults between the ages of 21 and 35, Friends for Hope is able to contribute to the clinic through fundraisers, community awareness and donations. With their motto of "hang out, have fun, and give back," members also have the opportunity to meet and socialize.

While the group is just in its beginning stages, members are planning a gala in the near future. In May, they held the 1st Annual Friends for Hope 480 Ranch Party with 170 guests attending. They raised over \$5,000 at the event for the clinic.

"Their help will make a tremendous impact on the lives of the patients at the clinic," said Dr. Juan Carlos Bernini, medical director of the clinic.

If you are interested in learning more about Friends for Hope, contact Laura Martinez Ilgun at 956-661-9840 or email rgvfriendsforhope@hotmail.com.

Planned Giving Helps Treat Local Children With Cancer

Did you know that you can use part of your estate to help treat children with cancer? There are four common types of bequests:

- ◆ **Percentage Bequest** – You specify a certain percentage of your total estate be given to the clinic.
- ◆ **Fixed Dollar Bequest** – You designate a specific amount of money to be given to the clinic.
- ◆ **Residual Bequest** – You specify that all remaining assets of the state, after bequests to heirs and beneficiaries, be given to the clinic.
- ◆ **Contingent Bequest** – You specify that, if all heirs and beneficiaries names in your will are deceased, the estate be given to the clinic.

For more information, speak with your attorney or contact Laura Martinez Ilgun at 956-661-9840.

Gifts to the Vannie E. Cook Jr. Children's Cancer and Hematology Clinic and Vannie E. Cook Jr. Cancer Foundation

We express our appreciation to all of our friends and supporters and to the following whose donations and pledges were made during the period of Sept. 1, 2004 to June 30, 2005.

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Walk and Ride for Life *The First Annual "Walk and Ride for Life" brought the community together through a bike tour to benefit the clinic. Pictured are Janie Avila, Daniela Vilarreal, and Jamie Rodriguez*



Children's Cattle Barons Fiesta *Gene and Melissa Mikulik served as co-chairs of the American Cancer Society's Children's Cattle Barons Fiesta. Similar events will be held all over the country to celebrate children and families who are affected by cancer. The Mikuliks are pictured with their children and Daniella Villarreal.*



Docs for Tots *donated \$8,000 to the Vannie E. Cook Jr. Cancer and Hematology Clinic in support of local programs for children battling cancer. Pictured from left are: Dr. Fredericka Borland, Bill Burns, Melody Smith, Laura Martinez Ilgun, Paul Forward, and Gabby Garza.*

Clinic Happenings



DeLeon Middle School Contribute *Students from DeLeon Middle School's National Junior Honor Society collected over \$5,000 for cancer patients. The money was used to purchase toys for children, and the remaining \$850 was donated to the cancer clinic. Seated, Caitlin Hinojosa; on floor, Samantha Garza; from left, Pat Pardon, Anna Reeve and Alma Garza.*



Alex's Lemonade Stand *Patient Sal Vela selling lemonade at Valley Race Park in Harlingen. Fundraiser raised over \$1,000 for Alex's Lemonade Stand For Pediatric Cancer Research. Proceeds will go to the Vannie E. Cook Jr. Children's Cancer and Hematology Clinic in McAllen.*

MEET THE STAFF



Front Row: Elda Guerra, Laura Martinez Ilgun, Dr. Rodrigo Erana, Dalinda Garcia; Second Row: Dr. Juan Carlos Bernini, Celeste Almaraz, Jaime Rodriguez, RN and Janie Avila, RN; Not pictured: Stefany Levrier Gonzales

Celeste Almaraz

Position at the Vannie Cook Clinic: Administrative Coordinator/
Medical Assistant

I was born in: Brownsville

Family: My family consists of my husband Jesse, and two children Celyn, 13, and Noah, 14 months.

One thing I'd like you to know about me: I like scrapbooking.

Janie Avila, RN

Position at the Vannie Cook Clinic: Registered Nurse- Nursing
Supervisor

I was born in: Weslaco, Texas

Family: Husband - Felipe Avila; Son - Eric David Avila, 7 yrs old.

One thing I'd like you to know about me: Working here is a dream come true for me. It is a personal fulfillment that enables me to feel accomplished and lets me know that our Lord has allowed me to be here for a purpose. Thank you for letting me serve you. God Bless You!

Name: Juan Carlos Bernini, M.D.

Position at the Vannie Cook Clinic: Pediatric Oncologist and
Hematologist & Clinic Medical Director

I was born in: Costa Rica

Family: Wife – Cynthia

Sons – Giancarlo and Alessandro

One thing I'd like you to know about me: I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to come to the Valley and care for the young children who are patients at the Clinic. Plus, I try to get outdoors as much as possible—I love it.

Name: Rodrigo Erana, M.D.

Position at the Vannie Cook Clinic: Pediatric Oncologist/
Hematologist

I was born in: Mexico City

Family: Married to Georgina and have four children: Ana Jose, Rodrigo, Maialen and Ander

One thing I'd like you to know about me: Not only do I like working with the patients, but also I really enjoy getting to know the families. Also, I am very pleased to be in this community where I feel that our facility has made a tremendous difference.

Dalinda Garcia

Position at the Vannie Cook Clinic: Medical Assistant/
Clinical Technician II

I was born in: McAllen but live in Pharr

Family: I am the oldest in my family I have one sister and two brothers. I am also a mother of three—one son and two daughters—and of course, a husband.

One thing I'd like you to know about me: The one thing I really enjoy is traveling. I like learning about different cultures and love spending my extra time with my family.

Stefany Levrier Gonzales, LMSW

(not pictured)

Position at the Vannie Cook Clinic: Social Worker

I was born in: Weslaco

Family: Husband, James; Daughter, Ashlei Anjuli, 7 years

One thing I'd like you to know about me: I always knew I wanted to help people and make a difference in their lives. I enjoy life and I love people. I'm good hearted, fun loving, and love to laugh. I come to work every morning with a feeling of excitement and energy, and at the end of the day, I leave with a feeling of tremendous accomplishment and fulfillment. I'm glad I have the chance to be in the presence of such wonderful, strong, and loving individuals everyday. Thank you patients and staff of Vannie Cook for having such a beautiful impact on my life.

Elda Guerra

Position at the Vannie Cook Clinic: Administrative Coordinator.
Medical Assistant

I was born in: McAllen

Family: One child, Beatrice, 6 years

One thing I'd like you to know about me: I enjoy dancing.

Laura Martinez Ilgun

Position at the Vannie Cook Clinic: Director of Development and
Public Relations

I was born in: McAllen

Family: One daughter, Isabella, age 12

One thing I'd like you to know about me: I have received much more from these children than they have received from me and the work that I do on their behalf. Their strength and courage in dealing with a life-threatening disease has been a life lesson.

Jaime Rodriguez, RN

Position at the Vannie Cook Clinic: Staff Nurse

I was born in: Mercedes (city not car)

Family: I come from a large family 3 girls and 3 boys (I'm the middle child). Wife, Yvonne, and two beautiful children Ana Liza and Alejandro

One thing I'd like you to know about me: I love the sport of cycling.

Guerra Brothers *(continued from page 1)*

build a new, state-of-the-art chemotherapy and infusion area which will allow the clinic staff to treat an additional eight to ten patients a day. This will make the long chemotherapy visits more comfortable for the patients and their families.

“I’ve known the Guerras for many years and have always known them to be very involved with their community, church, schools, and professional organizations. They strongly believe in helping others and giving back. The fact that they

believe in the work we are doing here, and have strongly endorsed our mission and chemotherapy unit expansion project is very meaningful to us all,” said Laura Martinez Ilgun, the clinic’s director of development and public relations.

Villarreal *(continued from page 1)*

The 60-minute drive to McAllen is much easier than the many hours it would take to get to a major city. Daniela was able to get almost all of her treatment in McAllen, and Dolly believes that this is what kept their family closer than ever.

The family knows what it is like to be split apart. Nine months into her treatment, Daniela became paralyzed. Eventually, the paralysis spread throughout her body up to her neck, and she could barely hold her head up. A trip to Houston became necessary.

The condition is very rare. Daniela was classified as one of the 19 or so children in the entire world who had this kind of paralysis due to leukemia. After spending three weeks in Houston, with Daniella’s 5-year-old brother Diego staying with his grandparents in the Valley, the Villarreal family went back to McAllen to continue treatment.

That stay in Houston gave the family a new appreciation of having a clinic close to their home and support system.

“We were willing to give up all of the facilities in Houston to be able to go home. Daniela wanted to go back to ‘her’ doctors,” says Dolly.

During a regular visit to the McAllen Clinic, Daniela will meet with Dr. Juan Carlos Bernini, medical director, and get in her game of UNO with Dr. Rodrigo Eraña. Dr. Bernini would even bring Daniella pizza or food from McDonald’s to entice her to eat when she lost a great deal of weight at the beginning of her treatment.

Dolly describes the clinic as a big extended family. She and another mother have even started a support group for parents whose children are going through cancer treatment. The support group is the first of its kind in the Valley, and Dolly says it’s their way of giving something back to the clinic.

“When Daniela was first diagnosed with leukemia, she asked me why God was doing this to her. I told her that God never does anything bad, and you need to find something good out of all of this. She told me that if she hadn’t gotten leukemia, she wouldn’t have met all of the great people at the clinic,” says Dolly.

The clinic encourages siblings of patients to participate in different activities such as holiday parties, so even they feel included.

Daniela is now in remission, and she has 8 months of treatment remaining. After that, she will continue to have physical therapy.

“She believes that she will walk again,” says Dolly, “and I believe her.”

The bond that Daniela has with the doctors and nurses at the clinic is amazing. “They are like family to us,” says Dolly. “Daniela bought Father’s Day presents for all of them.”