



Children receiving care at Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey will benefit from cutting-edge research and treatment initiatives led by the holder of a recently established endowed chair in pediatric hematology/oncology.

BIG HOPE FOR THE SMALLEST PATIENTS

A \$1.5 million gift from the Embrace Kids Foundation to Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey brings great promise for the treatment of children with cancer.

By Melissa Kvidahl

There is an excruciating vulnerability that comes with your child's cancer diagnosis. You are powerless to stop the disease, and you are looking to the person in the white coat to inspire hope, to perform miracles, to save your child—to be nothing short of everything.

Kris McDonald recalls the day in 1999 when a tumor the size of a man's fist was discovered in her daughter's abdomen. Eight-year-old Sammy had

stage IV Burkitt lymphoma—one of the fastest-spreading pediatric cancers—and the doctors needed to operate and start chemotherapy immediately. Sammy's doctor at the time was Bart Kamen, pediatric hematology/oncology chief at the Cancer Institute of New Jersey. After delivering the news, Kamen pulled out a bag of magic tricks, performed for Sammy, and explained how he would melt the tumor with medicine. "She looked at him, and she

looked back at her dad and me, and said, 'I can beat this,'" McDonald says.

Sammy did beat it, and her friendship with Kamen took root during six months of grueling treatment, lasted well beyond remission at age 9, and continued into her adult years. "You don't find those kinds of doctors all the time, but you can't trust your child to anyone of a lesser caliber," says McDonald. "There's probably no one more important in your world than your doctor and team of

nurses when your child gets a harsh diagnosis."

Kris McDonald is on the advisory board of the Embrace Kids Foundation, which recently made a \$1.5 million gift—matched by another \$1.5 million from an anonymous donor—to establish an endowed chair at Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey. The Embrace Kids Foundation Endowed Chair in Pediatric Hematology/Oncology will enable the Cancer Institute to recruit an internationally distinguished specialist to lead cutting-edge research and treatment initiatives benefiting children receiving care at the center. For the Cancer Institute, an endowed chair will go a long way toward attracting the best doctors and ensuring ongoing financial support in this area. For families battling a diagnosis, it also represents a dual commitment to compassion in practice and excellence in treatment—the very combination that helped Sammy grow into a healthy adult.

Because pediatric cancers are less common, percentage-wise, than adult cancers overall, there tend to be fewer resources dedicated to them, says Robert S. DiPaola, director of Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey. But for each family that faces a pediatric cancer diagnosis, the Embrace Kids chair brings new hope. In addition to providing an

ongoing source of funding specifically for the Cancer Institute's pediatric program, the new chair will recruit an individual who can lead the institute's research efforts for the pediatric population. "We need a national superstar, so to speak, to really grow and guide the pediatric program to the next level," DiPaola says.

The chair will have a particular focus on researching and implementing precision medicine, a relatively new field that involves analyzing and treating tumors on a genetic level, for the Cancer Institute's youngest patients. Through detailed analyses of cancer-causing genetic mutations, precision medicine allows oncologists to prescribe custom therapies for better outcomes. Personalization can also yield fewer side effects, improving the quality of life during treatment and keeping growing bodies as healthy as possible.

Since 1993, the Embrace Kids Foundation has given more than \$2.5 million toward research, faculty development, and support staff in various departments that are now part of Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences, including pediatric hematology/oncology at the Cancer Institute. This \$1.5 million gift is the foundation's largest commitment to date.

"This is for the child and family who have not yet been diagnosed," says McDonald. "You never know who may need it next. I certainly would have never guessed it would be me."