

SOLUTIONS MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Club nurtures sick kids

Friends of Scott offers support, resources to families facing cancer

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Carmen Delgadillo's son Scott can't be with her today.

Cancer took him on a Monday night in January four years ago. He was 14 and her baby.

Now, there are other children to look after, many with bald heads, fighting the illness that has caused Carmen so much sorrow. Though strangers at first, they are what keeps her going. Putting their needs ahead of hers. Doing what a mom is supposed to do.

Truth be told, starting a group to help children with cancer wasn't Carmen's idea. That came from Scott's friends, who made frequent visits to the Delgadillo's home in San Carlos after he died, just as they had when Scott was alive.

Scott called these friends his "A-Team." Andy, Aubrey, Ben, Julia, Sal and Shana. They wanted to start a club in his memory, and called it, appropriately, Friends of Scott.

When they visited Scott at Children's Hospital, they saw many children from out of town. The club, they decided, could provide company and support for them and their families.

Scott's friends, most of whom are in college now, help when they can. The same is true for Carmen's husband, Henry, and her oldest son, Eric. But it's Carmen, who will turn 43 on Thursday, who is the driving force behind helping the families and raising money to pay for the good deeds.

Being a mom is what Carmen always wanted. It's what she does best, said Henry.

"As a parent, you are entrusted with the care and raising of a child. I can't think of a better example of that than Carmen," he said. "The care she gives these families is the same she's given our boys, our family."



RONI GALGANO / Union-Tribune
Carmen Delgadillo (right) cooked dinner for children with cancer and their families at the Ronald McDonald House near Children's Hospital. Carmen's son Scott died from cancer at 14. One of Scott's friends, Sal Busalacchi (left) helped out.



RONI GALGANO / Union-Tribune
Scott Delgadillo loved football, especially the Fighting Irish of the University of Notre Dame. He and his family visited the campus in 2000 through the Make-a-Wish Foundation; Scott died three months later. His mother, Carmen, and older brother, Eric, are in his former bedroom.

The tangible good that Friends of Scott provides is readily apparent: hot meals, arts and crafts projects, gas cards, money for groceries, even pajamas. It's the more important intangibles that are harder to describe. The ability to forget about your cancer, even for a few minutes. Permission for you as a parent to think about yourself for a moment and not your ailing child. Having someone to talk to who knows your grief.

Carmen decided early on that serving meals at the Ronald McDonald House across from Children's would be a great way to meet families. The house is a home away from home for families with children undergoing long-term medical treatment. Most Wednesdays at 6:15, Carmen and about a half-dozen volunteers, many of them Scott's friends, serve dinner for about 40, usually Mexican food. One recent Wednesday, the fare was veal, cactus salad, rice, beans and cookies. Families agree it's the best meal of the week.

The volunteers arrived about 4:30 and an organized chaos ruled the snug kitchen and dining room for a few hours.

In the kitchen, cooks chopped tomatoes, cactus and chilis, fried veal and boiled rice. As the dinner hour approached, the aromas from the kitchen and the noise level from the dining room mixed together well, the perfect recipe for a relaxing late afternoon.

In the dining room, crafts were spread out on four small tables with seating for 16. At one table, parents painted wooden memory boxes and caught up with one another. At the other tables, children sat with volunteers and made beaded jewelry. Worries about cancer were tucked away.

Carmen moved quickly between the two areas, alternately lending a hand in the kitchen and catching up with families. Her conversations alternated, too, between English and Spanish.

Rebecca Rodriguez met Carmen one Wednesday in December when she came from Children's to grab dinner for her daughters. She couldn't stay long because she had to get back to 5-year-old Melanie, who has a rare form of cancer that attacked her adrenal glands. Rebecca remembers taking an immediate liking to Carmen.

When Rebecca came back the next week, Carmen had pajamas for Melanie and her big sister. What a thoughtful gift, Rebecca remembered thinking. The PJs were just what her daughters needed, a bit of normalcy, a touch of home.

On another visit, Carmen had something Rebecca needed – beads. A single mom, Rebecca had focused her energy on her daughter's cancer. The beadwork was calming. For a short time, thoughts of Melanie's cancer faded. It was just Rebecca and the beads.

"You are so alone in all this," she said. "It's your child, your child. You forget about yourself."

Carmen also offers Rebecca something more precious than the becalming beads. "We have had time to talk alone. It's so comforting," Rebecca said. "She says, 'I'm here, I'm here to help.' I've gained a friend and that's Carmen."

So has Cesar Luna. He met Carmen through the nurse at his son's school. Ten-year-old Cesar Angel Luna has leukemia.

Luna, a single father, has his mother and other relatives nearby. Not too long ago, after his son took a turn for the worse, Luna was scared and needed someone to talk to. It was 4 a.m. He called Carmen.

"For us, she's available 24 hours a day," he said. "She told me, 'You have to be strong. You have to be there for him.' "

Carmen celebrates happy endings. And she mourns with families when a child dies. Last weekend, a mom called to let Carmen know that her daughter had died. When the mother asked how she would get through her daughter's death, Carmen had this advice: "I said, 'It takes time, but you will learn to live a new life.' "

Family's magical weekend

Henry, Carmen, Eric and Scott had a life that revolved around being there for one another.

They went to church on Sundays and spent holidays with Carmen's extended family in Reno. Ski trips, mostly to Big Bear, were a must during the winter. Saturdays in the fall were spent at Eric's cross country meets and Scott's football games. As the boys got older and their lives became more complex, the family made a point of having dinner together at least four nights a week.

Life changed in January 2000. Eric and Scott had been sick with bronchitis. Eric got better, but Scott didn't. Swollen glands on the sides of his neck landed Scott in the doctor's office. One test led to another until Scott was diagnosed with leukemia, one of the deadliest forms of childhood cancer.

The disease did not take long to run its course, but Scott's last year was spent in the company of family and friends and, on one incredible day, with thousands of strangers.

In the fall of 2000, Scott visited the University of Notre Dame on a trip arranged by the Make-a-Wish Foundation. From the time he was a tender 4-year-old, Scott had been a huge Notre Dame fan. So when Make-a-Wish offered to grant him his heart's desire, he chose to attend a Fighting Irish football game.

He received game tickets and met coach Bob Davie. When Davie asked if Scott wanted to speak at a pre-game pep rally, he said sure.

In front of a crowd of 12,000, Scott spoke of faith, hope and the power of positive thinking. He told the crowd that in his darkest hours, Notre Dame and its football team pulled him through. After Notre Dame won a close game against Purdue, Scott was awarded the game ball.

It was a magical weekend for the Delgadillos. But one week later, Scott didn't feel well. It was the beginning of his decline. He died three months later.

A large Notre Dame flag was placed in front of the Delgadillo's home the day after Scott died. The only time it's taken down is during rain storms. The flag, family pictures and a collection of angel figurines offer constant reminders of Scott. And so does Friends of Scott.

Today, more than four years after Scott's death, Carmen cries easily when she discusses her youngest son. But the tears disappear when she's with children with cancer and their families. Around them, she finds her strength. Around them, she feels Scott.

In the days after his death, Carmen remembers asking herself how she would live without her youngest

son. To be sure, Henry and Eric were her first priority. And then there were all Scott's friends.

"It was really Scott's friends who got me through this," said Carmen, her voice dropping to a whisper. "I never thought of my emotions. I tried to keep my emotions intact for them."

Shana Dobrovsky was a member of Scott's A-Team. She met him during French classes in middle school. Their friendship became stronger during Scott's fight with cancer.

Teenagers aren't known for putting the needs of others first, especially someone who is ill and may die. But not the A-Team.

"I don't remember ever feeling like I could back away," Shana said. "I thought, 'He's my friend. I'm going to be here for him.' A few friends did pull away, but the rest of us never thought of it."

Shana, a freshman at the University of California San Diego, recruited some of her Chi Omega sorority sisters to help with meals at Ronald McDonald House. And next year, the university's fraternity and sorority system will donate money raised during its annual Greek Week fundraiser to the club Shana helped form.

Mother's devotion pays off

Friends of Scott had a humble beginning.

The first event was held a few months after Scott died, in the garden at Children's Hospital. They handed out small gift bags filled with candy, toys and McDonald's coupons and served doughnuts and juice. Henry and Carmen smile now at the simplicity of their first venture.

The first fundraiser was a carne asada dinner. Scott's friends handed out fliers to attract people. Later, a yard sale at the Delgadillo's raised about \$1,000. Everything had been donated by Scott's friends and family.

It wasn't until March 2003 that Friends of Scott became a nonprofit foundation. That's when fundraising became more ambitious and expanded beyond the neighborhood. Since then, the group has held more dinners, a night at a Padres game and, earlier this year, a bowling event with a silent auction that raised \$10,000. A golf tournament is in the works for September, childhood cancer awareness month. The foundation has raised about \$45,000. Acquaintances from her childhood in tiny McCloud in the shadow of Mount Shasta might be surprised by what she's accomplished, Carmen said. She was quiet and didn't have a lot of confidence. But a mother's love is a powerful force.

Carmen works full time in technical support for Cox Communications. Her workday ends at 1:30 p.m. Most days, she reaches Friends of Scott's donated office space on Sports Arena Boulevard by 2. She puts in about 20 hours a week.

There is no financial reward for volunteering, but there is no end to the emotional returns. Carmen's tiny, peach-colored office is decorated with pictures of smiling children, many without hair, a sure sign of chemotherapy. There are thank-you notes and a sweet message from a young boy she saves on her answering machine. And there is the football.

Two Sundays ago, Carmen was home when Cesar Luna called from his son's intensive care room at Children's to ask if she had time to visit. Cesar had something for her.

Carmen had a busy day planned, but nothing could keep her away from Cesar.

Someone at the hospital had given Cesar a football. He wasn't well enough to play with it, so his dad suggested he give it to someone special. He asked his dad to gather up some paint on a table beside his bed. He painted a football field and wrote Friends of Scott on one side of the ball and Notre Dame on the other.

Cradling the ball, Carmen said, "This is what it's about."

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