

# A Model Support Program for Children of Parents with Cancer

Your institution can apply for a grant!

by James Tracy

**M**aia Rogers was diagnosed with breast cancer on Nov. 7, 2002. Her husband Jed supported her through surgery and chemotherapy. After reading a brochure about the Children's Treehouse Program in their oncologist's office, she and her husband signed up for the spring 2003 sessions.

"This is the only program I could find that deals with kids as young as ours," said Jed. He and his wife began the program with a vague understanding that it would provide a benefit to their children, Caitlin, 5, and Eddy, 3. Both parents assumed "that since nothing obvious was going on with the kids, they were fine."

They were wrong.

"The children were much more affected than we had thought," said Jed.

The Children's Treehouse Foundation, a non-profit organization based in Denver, Colo., has a mission to establish support programs so the children of parents with cancer are better able to cope in the unsettling and frightening times following a cancer diagnosis. The foundation provides funds and training guidance to cancer hospitals and cancer centers.

The Children's Treehouse program is inexpensive and uncomplicated, and allows qualified institutions to apply for funding. If approved, the foundation tries to provide a grant to cover some costs of the program, which is designed for children younger than 7 and up to age 16. (Traditionally, support programs for children have neglected younger children, believing they may not have had time to develop understandings of illness and may not have mechanisms to deal with the psychological effects of a parent's cancer diagnosis.)

## How the Program Works

The Children's Treehouse Foundation provides initial training to selected cancer programs through a two-day seminar. Usually, two social workers from the cancer center are invited to attend. The social workers who are trained by the foundation then return to their programs with information and educational resources and, in turn, train the volunteers and staff taking part in the program at their cancer center.

Typically, the program runs one-and-a-half hour meetings, once a week for six weeks. At each session, parents with cancer network with other parents with cancer. The program provides a time and space for dialogue and advice about how to talk to their children about the events surrounding a cancer diagnosis. The program strives to put the parents at ease, while alleviating anxieties and concerns about their children's well-being. Importantly, the Treehouse program provides quality time for both parents and children to interact and learn from each other.

Participating cancer facilities receive training and program manuals developed by the foundation's CLIMB® (Children's Lives Include Moments of Bravery) program, funded by the Avon Foundation, and free copies of the book, *Helping Your Children Cope With Your Cancer—A Guide For Parents and Families*, written by foundation founder Peter van Dernoot.

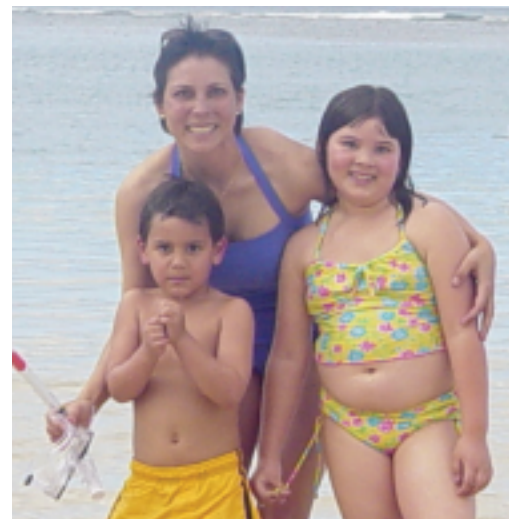
## Reaching Out to Children in Colorado

The Children's Treehouse Foundation recently completed a pilot program at the University of Colorado Cancer Center (UCCC) in Denver.

Since the UCCC did not have extra space in which to



Left, Maia Rogers with her two children, Eddy and Caitlin, in March 2003, three months into chemotherapy treatment for breast cancer.



Right, Maia and the children enjoy Hawaii during a visit in April 2004.

## The foundation provides funds and training guidance to cancer hospitals and cancer centers.

house the children's program, staff used an existing auditorium located in the cancer center and divided it in half with movable partitions. One half was dedicated to a play area for the children, and the other for children and their parents to participate in joint activities. The staff was able to set up and take down the partitions in just 30 minutes.

UCCC did have some out-of-pocket expenses. Toys and art supplies had to be purchased, and therapists and staff members had to set aside time for the sessions. Still, total costs were less than \$1,000 per each of the six sessions. Van Dernoot projects a total out-of-pocket internal cost that could be as much as \$50,000 per year, which would cover four six-session programs. The foundation suggests that some costs can be covered by donations and in-kind gifts.

Until the advent of The Children's Treehouse program, UCCC was able to provide only limited services to fewer than 50 children of parents with cancer a year. Today, thanks to the program, UCCC hopes to reach another 60 to 100 children, or more, a year.

Fifteen children, sometimes fewer, attended each session at the UCCC pilot program, with four to five guest therapists (physical therapists, plant therapists, etc.) or staff members on hand. All were taught by the social workers who attended training sessions. The suggested ratio of children to therapists is 2:1 or 3:1.

Children who attend the Treehouse sessions at the UCCC discuss the myriad of topics that cancer brings into their lives, including mortality and the disease itself. At the same time, even the more commonplace questions, such as, "Mommy, why don't we spend more time together?" are a focus of the group, according to Priscilla Ingebrigtsen, a social worker instrumental in bringing the program to the University of Colorado and administering it. "The program provides the children with tools to handle the inevitable anxiety," she said.

Sessions generally revolve around one activity. Particularly popular is the "Wish Bear," an activity in which the staff and therapists give a teddy bear to each child after holding it and making a "wish" for the child. The child then takes the bear home, where it becomes a physical reminder of the session. Other popular activities include creating sand board and sandbox displays; horticultural, physical, and dance therapies; and making paper hand puppets.

Kaitlyne Bobka, age 5, whose father was diagnosed with glioblastoma in October 2000, made a puppet at one session and glued oversized ears on it. Her mother Diana remembers her saying, "The ears mean that I want someone to listen to my feelings about my Dad."

Staff cannot completely control what happens in a session, and sometimes priorities are dictated by the

children in the group. According to Ingebrigtsen, one child's first words to the group were: "My name is Danny, and I'm here because my dad is sick, and I think he's gonna die." The Children's Treehouse Foundation established these sessions to address such unavoidable questions within the proper environment.

The Treehouse program also addresses the guilt children often experience over such large changes in their lives. The program, therapists, activities, and literature attempt to educate each child, in general terms, about the process and disease as a method to defuse misunderstandings such as "Will I catch cancer?"

UCCC staff discovered that the work with the parents was every bit as important as the work with the children. In one activity, parents were asked to write a letter to their children to be included in a photo album. The children added pictures and wrote down their feelings. The album gave the parents a safe space in which to discuss with their children critical issues in their lives and created something permanent and positive for the children.

### Fighting Mom's Cancer with a Sword

At the Treehouse program, Maia Roger's son Eddy worked through his feelings in a physical way. "He was able to use a toy sword provided by the staff to act out fighting mom's cancer. He attacked what was going on, trying to make her feel better," said Jed.

"I wasn't really excited about the plant therapy at first, but the three plants we started in the program are still growing in our kitchen window," said Jed. "They have become symbolic pieces of what we went through."

The Treehouse program helps to reassure parents that despite the seeming chaos of cancer, their children are having normal reactions and have a structured way to come to terms with their anxieties. ■

*James Tracy is ACCC editorial/production coordinator.*

### Contact The Children's Treehouse Foundation Today!

To learn more about the program and how to apply for a grant and obtain training, contact Peter van Dernoot at The Children's Treehouse Foundation. He can be reached at 50 South Steele St., Suite 430, Denver, CO 80209. Telephone: 303.322.1202; e-mail: [achildstreehouse@aol.com](mailto:achildstreehouse@aol.com); web site: [www.childrenstreehousefdn.org](http://www.childrenstreehousefdn.org).