

# Family Life

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14th Annual  
Cancer  
Awareness

# 14<sup>th</sup> Annual Cancer Awareness

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Photo by Kelly Kapoun

The Espinoza family: Marcos with their son Anthony, and Christian with their daughter Melanie

## Teddy Bear Cancer Foundation Keeps Espinoza Family Smiling

by Angel Pacheco

The discovery that a child has leukemia for some families turns what was supposed to be a regular checkup into an urgent trip to the hospital. In the blink of an eye, a carefree life of family trips to the beach and birthdays becomes one that is planned around daily drug regimens, spinal taps, chemotherapy sessions that last days and, of course, the repercussions for the little ones going through the exhaustive treatments.

That first shock is only the beginning of what is often an overwhelming nightmare, and naturally, these parents drop everything for their children. It's common for moms and dads to take lengthy leaves from work without pay to stay at the hospital for weeks to care for their children.

While these families put so much on hold, the reality is that the bills never stop and only add to the despair that comes with not knowing whether a loved one will relapse or even survive. Thankfully, Teddy Bear Cancer Foundation (TBCF) has been working directly in our backyard since 2002 to return some normalcy to the lives of tri-county families in need.

A social worker referred the Espinoza family to TBCF just this year after their 5-year-old son Anthony was diagnosed with acute lymphoid leukemia.

"A lot of things came to mind when his doctor told us about the side effects," said Anthony's mother, Christian. "We love our little boy with all our soul. He is our entire life and thinking even for an instant that we could lose him was devastating."

The concerned mother spent the first two months of Anthony's treatment in the hospital with him. The chemotherapy had a massive impact on the vibrant boy, affecting his abilities to walk, talk and eat.

"It was so difficult for my husband and me to see him like this," she said. "Our son – our little boy – was always lying in bed. It was the worst feeling in the world!"

TBCF was able to take some of the financial burden off of the young family, including helping cover the cost of car payments and a babysitter for Anthony's 1-year-old sister, Melanie. With



(L to R) Jason Wilson, Senior Vice President and Commercial Team Leader at TBCF Gold Ribbon Campaign Sponsor, Bank of Santa Barbara, with Anthony Espinoza, TBCF Kid.

Christian focusing on the two young children, her husband Marcos continued working. Financial help from TBCF allowed the father to take some time off to be at the hospital with his family.

"Our son's illness is already a lot to experience, and on top of that, having to worry about paying bills while my husband and I are not working full time is completely overwhelming," said Christian. "This is one of the reasons we are so thankful for Teddy Bear Cancer Foundation and all of the emotional and financial support they offer our family."

On top of helping them with some of the necessities, TBCF offered the Espinozas the chance to take part in a Family Fun Day, and Christian was even able to receive some much-needed rest and rejuvenation during a spa day coordinated by the organization. Toys provided by TBCF have also helped put a smile back on Anthony's face.

The Espinozas have also been able to go to TBCF's Family Support Groups, which are led by a licensed social worker and bring families together to help one another through these trying times.

Anthony has undergone a month of physical occupational and speech therapies since his treatments began. Fortunately, he is beginning to recover and is once again talking, smiling, walking and playing.

"Anthony still has a long way to go but I am very thankful with God that he is doing so much better," said Christian.

Founder Nikki Katz started TBCF after hearing a mother of a 3-year-old with a rare form of cancer break down as she shared what her son was going through as well as the hardships that came with battling the disease. This included unplanned and lengthy hospital stays, expensive medications and giving up income so she could be with her

son as he received treatment.

With these families at times struggling to do little more than get through extensive medication regimens each day, TBCF makes sure they always have roofs over their heads. The Foundation makes as much as \$12,000 available to qualifying families for rent, mortgage payments, auto loans and utilities, as well as medications and home care that insurance won't cover. TBCF will also cover hotels for immediate family during emergencies and unusually long hospital stays.

Even though the attention and finances of these families are tied up with making their children well again, it's hard to deny that a kid's year is marked by milestones like blowing out birthday candles, sitting around the table to carve the Thanksgiving turkey, and furiously ripping open gifts on Christmas morning. Not

wanting these children to miss a precious beat, TBCF works to ensure they'll have a memorable dinner and some goodies to open over the holidays. These kids may even get a birthday surprise while in the hospital.

TBCF understands how these traditions help shape the childhood that these kids deserve. From an extremely young age, they are forced to endure so much pain and show more courage than many adults.

Unfortunately, some of these families don't have long to be together, and a contribution to TBCF helps ensure those cherished days are spent smiling rather than focusing on piles of unpaid bills and where their next meal will come from. Please consider supporting TBCF with a gift today; every donation – whether your time, financial resources or talent – make a positive impact in the life of a child battling cancer. Please visit [www.teddybearcancerfoundation.org](http://www.teddybearcancerfoundation.org) or call (805) 962-7466 and give today.



## About Teddy Bear Cancer Foundation

Teddy Bear Cancer Foundation is a nonprofit organization providing financial and emotional support to families of children with cancer living in Santa Barbara, Ventura, and San Luis Obispo counties. Services are providing to families that have a child diagnosed with cancer up to age 18 and continue until they reach 21 years of age. In 2013, Teddy Bear Cancer Foundation provided services to 664 individuals. For more information about our organization, or to make a donation today, please visit us at [www.teddybearcancerfoundation.org](http://www.teddybearcancerfoundation.org) or call (805) 962-7466.

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## From the Editor's Desk:

**T**he October *Santa Barbara Family Life Magazine* is always an especially important one for me. Not only because October is Cancer Awareness Month, but also because both my parents died from cancer. Additionally, October was the month my mother celebrated her birthday. In 1998, the year I moved back to Santa Barbara and started SBFLM, my father announced he had prostate cancer. A year later my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. I can't even begin to put into words how blessed I felt that I had returned home and was able to be close to my parents during the last nine years of their lives. We had wonderful times going to symphonies, having dinners on my deck, watching amazing sunsets, playing tennis, sharing great moments together; that is up until the last several months before their passing.



Cancer is an insidious disease that robs you of all dignity, and when it begins to win it takes over all of your life. With my parents I witnessed the suffering of broken bones, loss of hair, debilitating frailty, and much more, before they finally let go of their pain-ridden bodies that no longer served any purpose. We have got to find a way to end this suffering! We need a cure, not just expensive pharmaceutical programs that provide chemicals to manage the disease and keep their profits growing. Yes, I'm angry, because many of the diagnostic tests are not covered by insurance and the treatment plans have costs that are so inflated that it has become a disease in itself.

So now that I have vented my frustrations, I want to also share my tremendous feelings of love and respect for those of you who are or have been caretakers, not just with cancer, but any situation that placed you in that role. It's too often a job that goes unacknowledged and unrewarded, and until you walk in those shoes it's hard to understand the challenges and stress that are the companion of having to witness a loved one suffer. I remember months of sleepless nights and trips to the hospital and doctor offices. One day a kind soul came up to me while I was sitting in the waiting room of the hospital and asked why I was there. I told my story. She gave me a hug and said, "Thank you." I burst into tears. I hadn't taken advantage of the local programs available so all the feelings were pent up and stuffed. One hug made a huge difference.

So for all of you who are in the background, doing the painfully difficult and challenging job of caretaking, that is tiring and often goes unnoticed and unrewarded, thank you!

There are wonderful organizations that are the support system for families trying to find a way to juggle their work life with caretaking responsibilities at the same time. One of those organizations is the Teddy Bear Foundation, which has been a blessing for the Espinoza family who are on our cover. And there are many wonderful organizations and resources available for those going through this journey. So if you know someone who is experiencing this challenge, take time out to give them a hug and encourage them to get the assistance that is available locally. I hope you find the information in this issue useful and my bigger hope is that we find a cure.

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