



COURAGE

FOR A

we

Gainesville family honors late daughter's wish to support pediatric cancer research at UF Health

BY TYLER FRANCISCHINE (BSJ 11)

Dear Friends,

July 3, 1983

My parents, Howard and Laurie, and my sister, Carolyn and I started the Stop! Children's Cancer Fund. We started this fund 2½ years ago. This fund is to help other children be cured of cancer.

Our family has put a lot of time and energy into this fund. I want everyone to appreciate all the hard work our family and others have done. I feel that since the money from this fund is for all the kids in the world, everyone should help! We need your help to raise over \$1,000,000.

Money is not the only way you can help. We need people to make things to sell, work on paper stuff and spread the word of the fund to others.

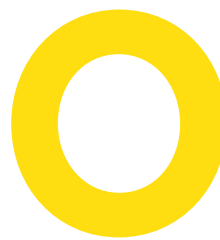
I don't want other kids and their families to go through all the same things which we had to.

Love,
Bonnie Freeman
12 years old



Bonnie R. Freeman was born October 8, 1970 and died at home on July 10, 1983 after a 2½ year struggle with leukemia.

One week before Bonnie lost her battle to cancer, she wrote this letter to encourage others to give to Stop Children's Cancer.



On a blue sheet of paper featuring hand-drawn pastel balloons soaring through clouds, a 12-year-old girl's neat, cursive lettering covers the page. The note,

which describes her aspirations for the future, was written one week before she passed away from cancer.

Bonnie Freeman's letter, dated July 3, 1983, explained the mission of Stop Children's Cancer, a Gainesville nonprofit aimed at the prevention, control and cure of childhood cancer. More than 34 years later, Stop Children's Cancer works closely with researchers at UF Health to advance the cure rate of pediatric cancers through clinical trials.

Howard Freeman (BAE 67, EDD 72, MED 68) says his organization, which he founded with his wife, **Laurel** (BAE 73), and their daughters, **Carolyn** (BSR 91) and Bonnie, is driven by Bonnie's desire to help other families dealing with the trauma of a pediatric cancer diagnosis.

"I'll never forget the day I drove to Bonnie's pediatrician to hear that she may have leukemia. From that point on, my family's lives were changed," Howard says. "Two to three weeks after she was diagnosed, Bonnie came to us and said, 'Why don't we raise money to help other kids and their families so they don't have to go through what we're going through right now?' For the next two years, Bonnie led her life with so much courage and enthusiasm. She helped us formulate the name Stop Children's Cancer. We know we can't bring Bonnie back, but every child that is helped — we call them our Stop Children's Cancer angels — makes us feel good about what we're doing."

In 2017 Stop Children's Cancer donated \$1 million to the University of Florida College of Medicine. The gift ensures the longevity of the Bonnie R. Freeman Clinical Trials Fund, established in 2011 by a gift of \$1.05 million. Over the last four decades, according to the Freemans, their organization has helped provide more than \$7 million in funding for pediatric cancer research at the UF College of Medicine. The most recent gift will continue to fund the



Howard Freeman, Carolyne Freeman, Laurel Freeman and Bella Freeman (Carolyn's daughter).

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— HOWARD FREEMAN

assistant directorship of the UF Pediatric Oncology Clinical Trials Office, held by **Giselle Moore-Higgs** (MSNSG 90, PhD 10). It will also support the UF Pediatric Sarcoma Center and the center's development of clinical trials to treat bone cancers like osteosarcoma and Ewing's sarcoma.

Dr. **William Slayton** (MD 92), division chief for pediatric hematology and oncology at UF Health Shands Children's Hospital, says funding from Stop Children's Cancer creates ripple effects, that ultimately led to improvements in cure rates for several pediatric cancers.

“Stop Children's Cancer has allowed us to attract leaders from across the nation to join our pediatric clinical trials program. We've doubled the number of physicians in the office from five to 10,” he says. “These trials have had a major impact on the cure rate for children with acute lymphocytic leukemia, or ALL, neuroblastoma and Wilms' tumors. The survival rate for ALL, which Bonnie had, was 67 percent in 1980. Now it's close to 90 percent.”

Dr. **Scott Rivkees**, chairman of the UF College of Medicine's department of pediatrics, says clinical trials — research studies and experiments that test a treatment's safety and effectiveness — lead to important translatable findings.

“We can learn a lot from one child, but we can learn more from 1,000. Supporting clinical trials allows us to link our findings with major cancer programs across the nation,” Rivkees says. “We can develop new forms of treatment and evaluate their efficacy.”

He calls Stop Children's Cancer a “grassroots community effort” and an operation with a serious impact on Gainesville and beyond.

“Research means hope, and research is incredibly expensive,” Rivkees says. “The amount of funding we receive through the National Institutes of Health is not enough for us to tackle serious illnesses like pediatric cancer. If not for the

support of groups like Stop Children's Cancer, we wouldn't have the resources to dream up and test new ideas.”

Laurel Freeman says she's proud that the funds raised by Stop Children's Cancer directly support efforts at UF Health.

“We decided to keep all the money we raise local,” Laurel says. “We want people to know the money isn't dissipating into the atmosphere. We target the support specifically. It's staying here.”

Howard Freeman says his 2017 induction into the UF Alumni Association's Grand Guard Society reminded him of the lasting impact of the values he learned during his years as a Gator.

“When I attended UF, I was very active in student organizations. That led me to becoming a member of Florida Blue Key,” he says. “I was taught that working hard and being diligent gives you opportunities to meet great people and have a meaningful life. Even though it's been 50 years since I graduated with my bachelor's, there's always an opportunity to learn.”

Bonnie Freeman seized opportunity; she began each morning with vigor, grabbing a pen and notepad and marching toward her parents, Howard recalls.

“She would say, ‘OK, Dad, what's the plan for the day?’ The day before, she would have gone through chemo,” he says. “The hardest thing we've ever done was lose our daughter. But Bonnie showed us how to live. We were with a hero, and so many of these kids being treated at UF Health are heroes. Kids like Bonnie who are going through these catastrophic situations have an unbelievable ability to rise above it and appreciate life for what it is. Bonnie is still in our hearts today.”

Slayton calls the Freeman family's work with Stop Children's Cancer an inspiring community effort.

“Their work is so vibrant and energetic,” he says. “It shows what an incredible legacy Bonnie's idea and her family's work has provided to her community.” ●

