

ancer



## Pediatric Cancer Fundraising Champion

Cancer is the leading cause of death in children but receives only 2 percent of federal funding for cancer research. Kristin Connor says that's not good enough.

By Mary Welch

**K**ristin Connor believes in miracles. Although there may be clinical reasons why her son's cancerous tumor disappeared by itself, she uses the "m" word. And, she wants similar miracles for every child diagnosed with cancer. Since she doesn't seem to have a direct line to the Great Miracle Maker, Connor has decided to fight cancer the good-old-fashioned way – raising money.

As executive director of the Atlanta-based CURE Childhood Cancer, Connor and her team are dedicated to raising money and to working with families of children diagnosed with cancer. Making her crusade more challenging – or more needed – is the fact that pediatric cancer receives only 2 percent of all federal research dollars targeted for cancer research.

"It's a numbers game," she says. "Federal funding is based on the number of people diagnosed with cancer. Statistically there are more people with breast, lung, colon cancers, for instance. But pediatric cancer is so different. Cancer is the leading cause of death in children, including car accidents, and cancer research gets so little funding. It's insane."

Connor's introduction to pediatric cancer hell came the hard way. A lawyer with Arnold Golden Gregory, she was pregnant with her second child when a routine ultrasound revealed a tumor on the spine of the embryo. "I didn't understand it," she says. "Brandon wasn't even born and they were telling me he had cancer, and it was probably neuroblastoma, an often deadly form of pediatric cancer. Doctors were talking to us about options. I cried for three weeks."

Of course it didn't help that Brandon was born two days after Sept. 11. "I was living in my own hell and watching all the 9-11 coverage in the hospital. And then Brandon got a cold virus that was very dangerous, and he spent two weeks on oxygen. Horrible two years."

The doctors monitored Brandon's tumor in the hopes that it would regress. It didn't. After two years the decision was made to undergo the risky surgery, and an MRI was done the night before he was to go into surgery in San Francisco. There was no evidence of the tumor.

"No one could really explain it, and at a certain point you don't care what happened," she says. "You just know that there's no cancer in your son's body. We were just overwhelmed. And, at the same time we had become friends with other parents whose children were being treated, and they didn't have the same results as we did. Our child was spared, and others weren't."

Although she went back to her law practice, she felt she was being drawn into a different direction. Her story was also getting media attention, and she was being asked to do interviews about childhood

cancer. "I couldn't get it out of my system," she says. "I just couldn't go back to my normal life after what happened. Especially when I found out about how little funding pediatric cancer gets."

Through some friends she met baseball great Tom Glavine who, coincidentally became friends with a family whose child had cancer. Glavine was ready to become a pediatric cancer champion, and the two met to plan how best to build awareness and raise funds. In 2004 Glavine went to Major League Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig, who ordered 1 million tickets from the league's 30 clubs and distributed them for a minimum donation of \$1 with the proceeds going to childhood cancer research. That year the league raised \$1.5 million, and the program continues today.

In 2006 she became the head of CURE. "CURE has such a

vision – to raise funds for childhood cancer. We decided that research was our passion and that we were going to fund solutions. There were other organizations that did warm and fuzzies, but we were singularly focused on research."

Today CURE is one of the most comprehensive children's cancer organizations in the country. It has provided millions of dollars of research and ongoing education on pediatric cancer. In May 2007 the organization donated more than \$1 million to the Aflac Cancer Center and Blood Disorders Service at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta.

The organization is funding the research of Dr. Harry Findley and Dr. M. Zhou on targeted therapies for leukemia and neuroblastoma. This year the National Institutes of Health/National Cancer Institute awarded Dr. Zhou a \$1.2 million grant to help fund research into better understanding resistant tumors and finding new treatments to block the proteins that cause "chemo resistant" cancer in children.

Funding is also being provided for Dr. Donald Durden's research into targeted therapies for neuroblastoma and childhood brain tumors. Durden, scientific director at the Aflac Cancer Center, has made a potentially major advancement by developing an anti-tumor compound that has stopped the growth of seven types of tumors in mice. Durden and his fellow researcher, who mortgaged his house to help fund the research, will start clinical trials probably next year in Atlanta.

Her plans for CURE are to raise money for research and raise awareness about pediatric cancer and the lack of federal funding. "We have to keep the [research] labs running until we start getting big federal grants."

On a personal front, her two children are healthy and she tries not to let fear of a recurrence slip into her head. "I don't want Brandon to live in fear," she says simply. ♀

"I just couldn't go back to my normal life after what happened. Especially when I found out about how little funding pediatric cancer gets. I knew my work wasn't done."