Profile | Kathleen O’Connell

The Power of Mother Love

When a mother’s love is so powerful it can move mountains, amazing things happen for a seriously ill son and the team that might cure him.

BY ELEANOR FOA DIENSTAG

The extraordinary battle waged by Lucas and his mom is awe-inspiring for many. “Kathleen is a wonderful, warm, caring mom who is a quiet storm,” says Dr. Black. “Clearly, she is able to get some remarkable things done. Their story just reaffirms our belief in the human spirit and that nothing is impossible.”

When I visit a patient and just say hello and show them I care, it’s nothing special, but it often means a great deal to them.

Rabbi Jason Weiner
Cedars-Sinai’s Jewish Chaplain

What I do
I try to visit every Jewish patient staying in the hospital twice each week. My goal is to give people a sense of hope and bring light into their room and to their life.

How I see my job
As a chaplain, I am on the frontlines of life and death. I am focused on intense issues that patients face and there’s an element of teaching and counseling in everything I do for them.

My never-fail source of joy
My kids, especially when they play dress up. My son likes to be a fireman and my daughter likes to be a princess. They are 6, three, and five-month-old.

My denomination
I don’t define myself as Orthodox or Reform—I’m just Jewish and I try to be there for everybody. My background is diverse enough that I’m open to everybody and able to attend to the many different needs of our community.

Favorite place to pray
I like to be in the back of a really big group of people who are praying because I enjoy being part of a large community and the energy is inspiring, but no one is watching me so I don’t feel like I have to perform.

Most unusual request I received
Recently performed a funeral for someone who had already been buried because the family didn’t like the first funeral.

My philosophy
If you were to watch a video of your life after you’ve passed away, it would be either rewarding to see everything you’ve accomplished, or very painful to see what you could have done and didn’t. I want to achieve what I’m capable of doing now—I don’t want to have to look back and think that I could have done more.

Smallest action that makes the biggest difference
When I visit a patient and just say hello and show them I care, it’s nothing special, but it often means a great deal to them.

What I wanted to do when I was young
I wanted to be a baseball player. I even pitched in college. It so happened that my college didn’t have a Jewish organization, so I started one and became the rabbi by default. It inspired me to try and make a difference in the world and help people.

My approach
I’m much more centered on action than prayer I pray for people, but most importantly, I try to see what I can do to help them.

My hospital
Cedars-Sinai.

I t began on a July 2008 weekend when Lucas Goldbaum, now 13, complained of double vision to his mother, Kathleen O’Connell. The following day, Kathleen and Lucas received the devastating diagnosis of a brain stem tumor. Lucas said it best on his blog: “One day I didn’t have a brain tumor [and] the next I discovered I did. Now I’ve got to battle this thing in my head and am very lucky to have an unbelievable family and friends fighting by my side.”

He’s also lucky to have Kathleen as his mother. She is a 20-year veteran of CBS News, now senior story editor of 48 Hours Mystery, and a get-it-done-now person. She’s applied all of her skills as a producer in television news to organizing medical help for her son. As colleague Jennifer Simpson puts it, “She is a force of nature who moves mountains, walks through walls, and makes things happen.”

At first, Lucas was very sick. “I don’t think I left his side for three months,” Kathleen recalls. But within hours of Lucas’ diagnosis, Kathleen had recruited and organized friends and colleagues at CBS into support teams. Over the years, Kathleen has nurtured a huge network of people who, when they heard the news, launched a full-court press.

Some took care of Lucas’ younger brother. Some did a year’s worth of research in a week, assembling a huge global database on Lucas’ illness, doctors to call, clinical trials to investigate, leaders in the field, and children with the same disease. No stone was left unturned.

Ultimately, it was decided that Lucas’ best hope to beat his disease lay in pioneering research conducted at Cedars-Sinai, in the Maxine Dunitz Neurosurgical Institute. The research, led by John S. Yu, MD, director of Surgical Neuro-Oncology, and Keith L. Black, MD, chairman of the Department of Neurosurgery, focused on developing a unique vaccine to trigger a patient’s immune system to attack the tumor. Says Dr. Black, “We’ve treated close to 200 patients with the vaccine and what we’ve found is that if we are able to activate their immune system, their survival is double that of the patients whose immune system we cannot activate.”

While physicians at Columbia and Duke universities were creating a unique chemo cocktail for Lucas to keep the tumor at bay, Kathleen decided to help accelerate the vaccine research at Cedars-Sinai by launching a grassroots fundraising campaign. With the assistance provided by her army of friends, family, and CBS colleagues, she raised $250,000 in about two and a half months. Dr. Yu calls the speed and reach of the campaign “amazing and highly unusual.”

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Above all, Lucas is surrounded by love from friends, family, neighbors, and strangers (including the Tibetan Buddhist monks who pray for him and the 20,000 visitors to his CaringBridge Web site). Every night, Kathleen and her son hold hands, do guided imagery, and pray together. “I like the person he’s become through this illness,” says Kathleen. “He is my hero.”