

Brighter Tomorrows; One Family's Perspective

It started with a few families who decided no family should ever face childhood cancer alone. They knew that was true, having done it themselves, and they dedicated themselves to change that. They named the group "Brighter Tomorrows" and they philanthropized an outreach to families touched by childhood cancer.

It's a group of people who've traversed a very difficult journey. A group who understands what you're feeling before you even understand it yourself, even though each cancer journey is different. Our oldest daughter, Ana, was 3 years old when our family joined the group. She had been diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor, and our life was turned upside down. We also had a 1 year old, Elsa, who we were taking along on the journey; a journey that we, as parents, didn't even know how to survive ourselves.

Four years have passed since that day, and cancer is still a part of our lives. Unfortunately, it will always be. Ana's tumor is burrowed in her brainstem. We can hope to kill it with chemotherapy, but we haven't been completely successful at that yet. We get to watch her go through trials of streaming toxic medicine through her body, unsure if it will get the cancer, unsure if it will get other parts of her that we wish it wouldn't, unsure of what each day holds. Surgery and radiation are less favorable options for a multitude of reasons, including that she may not be able to survive the swelling that occurs after it. We are learning to live with what we have been dealt, and make the best of it. Thankfully, we have a community of family, friends, colleagues...even strangers who have revealed the goodness in the world by reaching out to us when we are struggling. We have been blessed. Together, our community and Brighter Tomorrows bring us hope.

When Brighter Tomorrows meets, we commune with others that feel broken, afraid, misplaced, run down and exhausted. The heartfelt connection of another parent who knows what it feels like to fight for your child's life is critical when you're in the depths of it. It's like an invaluable mentor who can't fix it or solve it for you, but can be there to comfort, to understand, to embrace and help you find peace in the midst of it.

Brighter Tomorrow's has a unique perspective. There isn't much concern about Black Friday deals to be had or the latest headline...but there is tremendous concern about a child being able to make it to a birthday party or a prom or, simply, a school recess.

When your child is battling cancer, it can feel like the world--all around--is buzzing. Plans are being made, and friends are discussing programs, get-togethers and a full agenda. Yet, in the midst of normal everyday business, we're often heavy-hearted parents painting on a smile because it feels the right thing to do but some times, we're truly filled with sorrow inside. Just trying to find good in the day, and not able to count on any future plans whatsoever.

When we are at Brighter Tomorrows, we can take off our mask and be real. We cry but we also laugh and find humor in the darkness. It feels that in this union, hurting hearts are mended, energy is restored, and hope is found. Masks come off and relationships are formed with a deepness that is hard to explain. It's almost like together, we find an armor to live in this world, where our eyes see so many healthy children doing things we wish ours could be doing. It's a heterogenous group of parents. All religions, all ethnicities, all different walks of life. But we are a cohesive group in that we all cling, desperately, to life. We live for the moment, and hope for more with our children. We support the fighters, admire the survivors, and honor the taken. The all too many, taken. And those families need hope, too. A common phrase tossed around is "Welcome to the club you never wanted to be a part of." And that's what it is. Welcoming. Encouraging. Making tomorrow brighter, even when the sun isn't shining. – Submitted by the Vankoeverden family; Heather, Kevin, Ana, and Elsa