

the Royal Neighbor

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INSURING LIVES • SUPPORTING WOMEN • SERVING COMMUNITIES™

Women in Leadership series:
Gretchen Witt leads with love
in honor of her son

Front&Center

GRETCHEN WITT leads with love in honor of her son



Gretchen Witt is a young woman with a husband and daughter, a job she loves, and good health. Her optimistic and confident personality bely the fact that her world was turned upside down when she lost her young son, Liam, to pediatric cancer in

2011 at age 6. In his honor, she and her husband are taking a stand against the disease that takes the lives of more children in the United States than asthma, multiple sclerosis, AIDS, and muscular dystrophy combined. They established the Cookies For Kids' Cancer™ Foundation to raise money for treatment of this devastating disease. Through 4,000 bake sales in 50 states and 13 countries and countless individual cookie and cookbook sales, the organization has donated nearly \$4 million in four years.

What was the catalyst for raising money?

When Liam was diagnosed, I learned all I could about his illness and was amazed that I hadn't known the statistics about pediatric cancer. I realized that kids with cancer don't make headlines because, I think, it's so bloody scary. It's like the monster in the closet that no one wants to think about. So if we don't think or talk about it, it won't happen.

At the time, we didn't know if he was going to make it six days or six months, so I filed all the statistical information away in my head knowing that I wanted to address the issue after I had taken care of Liam.

Why a cookie bake sale?

In the fall of 2007, Liam was cancer-free. We literally had rescued him from the grips of this awful disease. I was so grateful he was on the positive side of the statistics that I wanted to raise money for the next generation of treatment that was available but was basically sitting on a shelf waiting for funding.

I was waiting on the steps of Liam's school wondering how I could do that. I thought "Do what you know and what you love." I enjoy baking because it is a demonstrative act of love. The holidays were coming up, a time when everyone scrambles to find gifts that they not only feel good about spending their dollars on,

but that the recipients will feel good about receiving.

I decided to get my friends together and bake cookies. I didn't want to bake just a few cookies and make just \$100 or \$1,000. I wanted to challenge myself. I crunched the numbers of people I knew and how many people they could reach and came up with 96,000 cookies (8,000 dozen).

After we sold out of cookies, people still wanted to make donations. At that point my husband and I realized we had struck a nerve. We had found that sweet spot in people that allowed them to get involved and give back.

We used our business and PR skills to develop the website and set up Cookies For Kids' Cancer™. I wanted to create a model or a shell that anyone could take on. The beauty of Cookies for Kids' Cancer is that anyone can get involved anywhere, any time of year at whatever level is best for them. *a citywide bake sale*

name to be remembered and recognized. How can you get involved with an organization that has someone else's child's name as the title? The fear that I had, as many others do, is that our child would just be a statistic and be forgotten.

How are your donations used?

We grant in \$100,000 increments. According to the leading pediatric oncologists, that's all that's needed to get something going. From the beginning, part of our mandate has been to fund projects that have the best chance of helping a child within a 12 to 24-month period vs. research just for research. Our focus is to help with those projects that have the best chance of making it to a clinic to help a child.

What would Liam think of the foundation?

This is my son's way of reminding me again and again of how much he loved. It was a testament to him to

love is a good business model. It means we're not going to do the wrong thing, we're always going to do the right thing.

It's all because I had this little boy who never did anything other than show people he cared about them. When he passed, standing in the room were a maintenance person, the chief of pediatric surgery, the security guard, and one of the chefs from the kitchen. It was a mix of people from every single walk of life because he showed everyone the same compassion no matter what color of coat they had on or what their badge said. It just didn't matter and it shouldn't matter to us. We're all people and we all deserve a fighting chance and respect, courtesy, and love.

What does the phrase "new beginnings" mean to you?

New beginnings has so many different meanings. For some it's the chance to get a new cancer treatment; for

Go to www.royalneighbors.org/ cookies to read more of Gretchen's story.

"Like" us on Facebook at www.royalneighbors.org/ Facebook for an opportunity to win a signed Cookies for Kids' Cancer: Best Bake Sale Cookbook