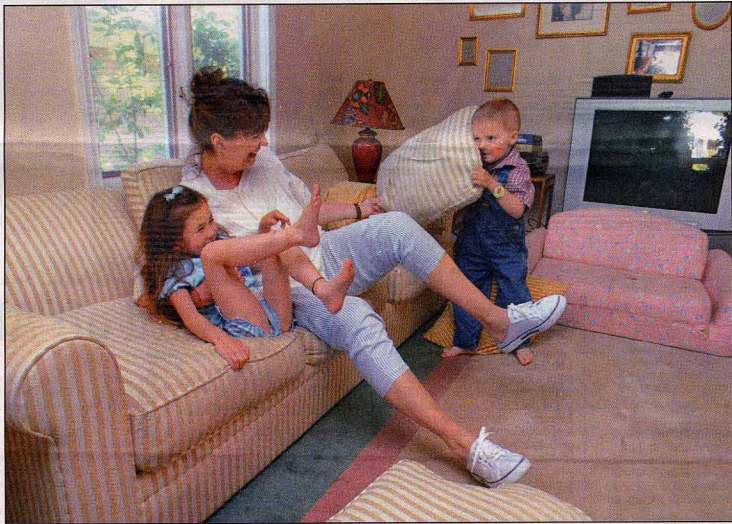


Illness hits grandkids, and old friends learn about perseverance



MERYL SCHENKER / P-I

These two children, Brandon Brauns, 4, right, and Nicole Howard, 6, were diagnosed with life-threatening forms of cancer. Brandon is about to hop his "adopted" grandmother, Dee Howard, with a pillow. Howard has known Brandon's grandmother, Diane Forth, for 40 years.

Cancer, endless talk and tears

BY CAROL SMITH

P-I reporter

They've known each other for 40 years. Been through the usual complement of life's ups and downs — marriages and divorces, children growing up and moving out.

One is short, one tall. One outgoing, the other more reserved. Tears well — from laughter and from pain — when they finish each other's stories.

They are best friends, for better or worse.

They've had plenty of time for better years. Now come the worse.

By sheer coincidence and bad luck, both Dianne Forth and Dee Howard have grandchildren with life-threatening forms of cancer. Forth's 4-year-old grandson, Brandon, is battling a malignant brain

tumor. Howard's granddaughter, Nicole, now 6, has been fighting a rare form of leukemia since she was 4.

Once again, the two friends have turned to each other for sup-

port, but in doing so, they've given their children an unusual gift — a bond with another family that shares the intimate knowledge of what it's like to deal with childhood cancer.

"We (as grandparents) can empathize, but (the parents) have been through it. They can truly say, 'I know how you feel,'" said Forth, 57, the shorter, self-described "mouthy" one.

"You can't put it into words," said Brandon's mother, Kris Brauns. "They've been there."

The Braunses, who live in Bothell, never expected to be. In December, Brandon began having headaches and throwing up. The doctors thought he had a virus, but the nausea got worse.

On Feb. 4, he was diagnosed

with ependymoma, a rare brain tumor. Six days later, surgeons at Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center cut out half the tumor, which was deeply entwined in the nerves at the base of his brain. The surgeons feared they would cut Brandon's cranial nerve, with possibly catastrophic consequences, if they operated further.

Desperate, and with support of the Children's team, the family turned outside their insurance network to find doctors willing to perform the delicate surgery. They had to move quickly. Each day that passed was another chance for the tumor, beaten back with chemotherapy, to stir back to life, to pen-

SEE GRANDMAS, A6

GRANDMAS: 'We laugh. If you don't, you won't make it'

FROM A1

erate new tissue in the brain, to become what parents fear the most: inoperable.

Surgeons at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Tennessee, who see larger numbers of patients with this form of tumor, agreed to operate.

Déjà vu

When Forth first got the news about Brandon, she was devastated—both for her daughter and son-in-law, and for her grandson, an energetic kid who loves pancakes and wants to be a pilot when he grows up. Howard was the first person she called.

For Howard, it was *déjà vu*. Two years earlier, Forth had been the first person she'd turned to with the shattering news that her granddaughter, Nicole, had been diagnosed with chronic myeloid leukemia. Her best hope for survival was a bone marrow transplant, but because she's half Japanese, the prospects of finding a match were slim.

Matches for mixed-race patients are rare because there are so few multiracial donors in the registry.

The two grandmothers went straight to work, helping organize a massive bone marrow donor search, in conjunction with other family and friends, to find a match. The drive has recruited more than 6,000 people to be tested. At least one match for another family has resulted, and 21 other possible matches are being worked up now. But none, so far, for Nicole.

A new cancer drug called Gleevec, however, is buying her time.

"She's gained six pounds in six months," said Trish Howard, Nicole's mom. "She's started acting like a normal child."

In fact, she's just graduated kindergarten in Seattle, something her parents were told might never happen.

Still, there's the possibility the drug won't work forever.

"I want to have a plan B," said Trish Howard, who is continuing to try to find a match.

'Kids are such good teachers'

Living with uncertainty and facing down bad odds are two aspects of cancer that the families have been able to talk about.

They've also shared more practical advice—how to organize for insurance battles and get second opinions. How to take care of themselves and their marriages in the midst of a crisis.

The Brauneses, for example,



MERYL SCHENKER / P1

Forth, left, called her friend Howard when she learned that her grandson, Brandon, had a brain tumor. Two years earlier, Forth was the first person Howard turned to when her granddaughter, Nicole, was diagnosed with leukemia.

now face an unpaid \$90,000 surgery bill from St. Jude. Their insurance company, Group Health, has twice denied payment on the grounds it was done outside the provider network and was experimental. (The Brauneses' doctors at St. Jude say the procedure is now the protocol of choice for this type of tumor.) A third and binding appeal will be done by an outside panel. Group Health said it could not comment on the case.

The grandmothers who brought the families together take comfort knowing their kids have each other. One of the hardest parts of having grandchildren with cancer has been seeing the parents in pain, Howard said.

"You do a lot of hugging," she said. "There's not much you can do." Still they manage to find ways to help.

The two friends have sat together in waiting rooms. Brought food. Lent cars. Organized fund-raisers. Babysat. Taken grim notes in doctor conferences. Prayed.

It's not a scenario either would have imagined when they met in 1963, fresh out of high school on their first jobs at the Bank of California in Seattle. Forth, a Franklin High graduate, was the southerner and Howard, who graduated from Shoreline High, the northerner. They were both called "Dee-Dee" growing up. Their birthdays were six days apart.

"We just seemed to like each other," said Forth, who now lives in Monroe. They lost touch for a while after they left the bank, but ran into each other in a lighting store in 1985. It's been non-stop talking since.

They talk so much, they'll get lost driving or lock keys in the car, confirm family members.

Sometimes they don't have to say anything, though. Not too long ago, they stopped for dinner, in the wake of particularly bad news, and just sat at a restaurant clutching hands across the table, crying.

"I'm sure people thought one of us was breaking up with the other," laughed Forth.

Dealing with cancer has taught

HOW TO HELP

For information on how to help Nicole Howard, 6, and Brandon Brauns, 4, visit www.helpnicole.org and <http://brandonsgoal.org>

them lessons they didn't expect.

"These kids are such good teachers," said Howard, who lives in Seattle.

They are learning from their grandchildren about courage and acceptance.

And perseverance. Brandon has been tube-fed since his second surgery in May because nerve damage has made it difficult for him to swallow. But he's keeping close tabs on which restaurants he wants to go to when, as he puts it: "I can eat out of my mouth again."

The two grandmothers have agreed not to partake of pancakes or birthday cake until Brandon can eat again.

And he's taught them to look on the bright side. After the cancer surgery, Brandon said the good thing about not being able to eat is that "I don't have to cook and I don't have to dishes." Doctors say the second surgery dramatically improved his prognosis and he now has an 80 percent chance of being cancer-free for the next three years.

It's Nicole, however, who has taught them the most about dealing with pain.

Whenever she has to endure yet another shot or procedure, she just hums to take her mind off it.

The grandmothers may not hum, but they laugh to accomplish the same thing.

"This has had all the earmarks of a real bad novel," Forth said. "So that's what we do—we laugh. If you don't, you won't make it through."

P1 reporter Carol Smith can be reached at 206-448-8070 or carolsmith@seattlepi.com