Helping Kids Get on the Bright Path

Will knows *Home Alone* by heart and laughs in anticipation of the movie’s antics. Much to his mother’s chagrin, he cracks up when he gets a sneak peek of the TV show *Family Guy*.

“Doctors told me he would just be in a vegetative state. He’s done things they never thought he’d be capable of,” said his mom, Melissa Sams. “They told me he would not live to be an adult.”

**Will was born with hydranencephaly, with fluid in his brain preventing development beyond his brain stem.** But his bright smile, contagious laughter and high-fives confirm his place in Melissa’s life and heart each day.

“The first couple of years, we basically lived in the hospital and we had a few close calls,” noted Sams. “I would not wish the stress on anyone, but I wouldn’t change it for the world.”

The stress of caring for a child with complex needs is a burden Sams knows well, as she has journeyed through health systems, bills and resources mostly on her own since Will was an infant.

That changed in June 2019, when **Will became one of the first patients enrolled in Bright Path, a new pediatric palliative care program started by Bluegrass Care Navigators.** Bright Path includes a clinical team who only treats kids – and supports the whole family through the physical, emotional and spiritual ups and downs of a serious illness.

“They have moved mountains that I haven’t been able to move in 14 years,” said Sams. “As a special needs mom, it’s just a huge weight lifted off. I can tell a big difference in my stress level.”

Bright Path clinicians serve as an extension of a child’s specialty medical team, providing clinical care in the home in hopes of reducing emergency care episodes and hospital visits. In addition, the team can help families connect with community resources to further reduce the stress of caregiving.

“I can focus on Will instead of what doctor to call or how to get the equipment we need,” said Sams.

Andrea Haggard, who is an Advanced Practice Registered Nurse for Bright Path, said that a big part of her job is making families smile again.

“Our program is giving these kids back their childhood. It is really heavy, what these families are dealing with. And it’s not just about the child. It is the whole family and they are dealing with so much,” said Haggard.

In addition to providing medical care in the home and helping families navigate the complexities of our health system, **the Bright Path team helps build consistent, family-centered interactions.**

“We go in and treat each family member as an individual,” said Haggard. “And in Will’s case, we can’t forget that he is a 14-year-old boy!”

While it’s impossible to know what the future holds for Will, his mom hopes for 14 more years – or more.

“I just want him to be happy,” said Sams. “We still have a long journey ahead but Bluegrass Care Navigators is making the road easier.”

If your family or someone you know could benefit from Bright Path palliative care, visit: [www.bgcarenav.org/brightpath](http://www.bgcarenav.org/brightpath). If you would like to make a gift to support kids in our Bright Path program, please go to [give.bgcarenav.org/bright-path](http://give.bgcarenav.org/bright-path).
Golf Tournament Supports Pediatric Palliative Care Program

For 10 years, Alice Sparks and a committee of dedicated volunteers have hosted the Fore! Kids Golf tournament in Northern Kentucky to support children coping with life-limiting illnesses and their families. This year’s event was held on September 20 at the Twin Oaks Golf Course in Covington. Golfers enjoyed picture-perfect weather, lunch, dinner and a silent auction. All funds raised from the golf outing support Bright Path, a new pediatric palliative care program offered by Bluegrass Care Navigators to meet the unique needs of kids with serious illness.

“Although funds from the tournament always have been dedicated to families with children in our care, having this specialized program designed just for kids is truly aligned with the spirit in which Alice and the volunteers contribute so much to our organization,” said Laura Klumb, vice president of philanthropy for Bluegrass Care Navigators.

Alice started the Fore! Kids Golf Outing as she grieved the loss of her 12-year-old grandson, Alex Zdolshek in 2009, to a rare soft tissue cancer. Sparks recalled that “the Bluegrass Hospice Care Team came to help us cope physically and mentally, and we were impressed by the kindness and caring devotion to Alex and all of us. They were able to make his final weeks less painful which helped the entire family.”

Volunteer Spotlight: Chuck McIntyre

“She’s really cool, really pleasant.” That is how Chuck describes Lois, a hospice patient he visits with on Monday nights. Chuck is 31; Lois is 90. “We have a lot more in common than outward appearances might imply.”

Chuck studies social work at the University of Kentucky and plans to focus his career on end-of-life care and grief counseling. He says he was inspired to take this path after his grandmother passed away two years ago.

“She was a long-time counselor at Berea College,” Chuck recalled. “As I was driving to work one day, I went past the hospital and it was like I was hit by lightning in my chest. I just knew what I was meant to do.”

He was prompted to volunteer as a class requirement. The choice was clear, said Chuck, that Bluegrass Care Navigators was where he wanted to donate his time. In fact, he had already completed our required volunteer training.

Chuck was paired with Lois in March and continues to visit her once a week. “Lois and I are good friends,” Chuck said. “She has taught me how important it is to just be present with people, how much of a difference that can make for someone.”

Lois is fond of Chuck, too – although she wasn’t sure about the pairing at first.

“When they said, ‘He’, I thought, what am I going to do with a male? And they said, he is young and a part-time student. And I thought, I’ll try anything once. And then he came, and now I won’t let him quit,” Lois said.

This connection is a big part of what makes hospice volunteering so valuable. It provides comfort to a patient during the end-of-life process. Sometimes patients may not have any family or loved ones to visit them, and a volunteer can offer friendship and emotional support.

When Lois was asked what she thought about Chuck, she had one more thing to say. “He’s just great. He is just a big overgrown kid. I just love him to death; he is so sweet.”

At Bluegrass Care Navigators, we depend on our team of volunteers. Last year, volunteers donated 29,135 hours, which equals a cost savings to the agency of $715,919. If you are interested in volunteering with Bluegrass Care Navigators, please go to bgcarenav.org/more-about-us/volunteer.

Tell Us Your Story!

Please take a quick moment to tell us how our staff, our services or our support has made a difference in your life or the life of someone you love, at: bgcarenav.org/mystory
Meet Our New Furry-Faced Team Members

Patients and families served by Bluegrass Care Navigators will soon have access to supportive therapies to complement their clinical care plan, through a new Integrative Medicine program.

The newest members of the team – three adorable puppies – are in training now to be our first animal-assisted therapy dogs. And they now have perfect names, thanks to the hundreds of thoughtful suggestions submitted from supporters around the Commonwealth.

Sampson and Rosemary are Labrador Retrievers and Grace is a Golden Retriever. These furry-faced therapists will be ready for duty in a few short months.

Integrative Medicine brings conventional and complementary practices together in a coordinated way as part of the patient’s medical care plan. The program was developed at the recommendation of the organization’s board of directors, who identified a need for supportive therapies to help make every moment count for patients and families experiencing serious illness.

“The practice emphasizes a holistic, patient-focused approach that mirrors our goals of hospice care,” said program coordinator Whitney Clay. “These therapies help us focus on the emotional and spiritual needs of our patient while also supporting their physical care.”

In addition to animal-assisted therapy, the program will include mind-body techniques such as music and art therapy; and body-based techniques such as acupuncture, massage, yoga and aromatherapy. To learn more, visit give.bgcarenav.org/puppies.

Thank You, Friends!

Radio Days is a Hit
We did it! We hit our goal, raising more than $25,000 through the 2019 Radio Day event! Thank you to all who donated their money and time to this effort! We appreciate every single one of you!

Buffalo Trace Invests in Us
A big thank you to Buffalo Trace Distillery for its commitment to the missions of many nonprofits that make Frankfort, Kentucky, a great place to live and work. We are blessed to be among the amazing groups chosen for their investment this year!

3M Donates Office Supplies
Our Cynthiana regional office was surprised by a large donation of office supplies. Through 3Mgives, an employee of the local 3M nominated BCN to receive the wonderful gift. Thank you!

Thank You, Kentucky Colonels!
Thanks to a grant award from the Kentucky Colonels, we will purchase five new patient beds for the Greg and Noreen Wells Bluegrass Hospice Care Center in Hazard. We are grateful for this generous support of our hospice patients in eastern Kentucky!
DID YOU KNOW?

So much of our work depends on the support of friends in the community, and one of the things we need most is gift in-kind donations. Do you like to quilt or crochet? Maybe you are an avid Amazon shopper or your employer has a program set up to supply needed items to nonprofit organizations.

We need items, such as:

- Blankets and flags for our veterans program
- Art supplies for families to make legacy items together
- Caregiving supplies like formula and diapers for our Bright Path patients
- Chew toys and crates for our therapy pups-in-training

*Please keep Bluegrass Care Navigators in mind for any items you may want to donate. And remember that these gifts are tax-deductible.*

Check out our Charity Wishlists on AmazonSmile, visit give.bgcarenav.org/wishlists or contact us at give@bgcarenav.org to find out how to make a gift in kind to support our patients and families.