



CHARITY PARTNER: THE COOL KIDS CAMPAIGN

Two years ago, Meredith Kelly and Steve Stuck took to their respective starting lines for their first running of the Under Armour Baltimore Running Festival. Kelly, a mother from Alabama, and Stuck, a father of four from Baltimore, didn't know each other but were united to raise money for a common cause - The Cool Kids Campaign, one of the several charities associated with Baltimore's premier fall event.

The Cool Kids Campaign was founded by Rob Belanger, Chris Federico and Sharon Perfetti in 2006 to provide kids with cancer a higher quality of life for themselves and their families while facing the challenges of cancer.

The organization also has a more recognizable co-founder, the 2006 World and 2007 National Figure Skating Champion Kimmie Meissner. The Maryland native was drawn to the organization after losing her friend Kati when they were both just 15 years old.

Meissner said, "We had always talked about what we wanted to do when we grew up and mine was always to go to the Olympics and hers was to run in a marathon for Team in Training. She passed away a few months before I made the Olympic team in 2006. It had a very profound effect on me so when I started to have success in skating I knew that I wanted to somehow use it to help cancer patients."

Early on, the program involved the creation of packages sent

directly to the kids which included books, games and anything else that would take their mind off the long road of treatment ahead of them. After compiling and sending 10 packages to West Virginia and Maryland the first year, Cool Kids has mailed more than 13,000 packages to all 50 states.

In addition to the packages, Perfetti and her team write, edit and publish a quarterly newsletter entitled Cool Kids Connection that is sent to more than 200 hospitals nationwide. The Connection's goal is to give thousands of pediatric oncology patients a newspaper that they can relate to, that is filled with stories and pictures of kids just like them. Cancer patients are encouraged to send in anything they want to see in future editions so that others affected by the disease can share in their joy.

Based on the success of the packages and the newsletter, the Cool Kids Campaign has opened the Cool Kids Learning Center in Baltimore. This state of the art facility will help address the social and academic implications of childhood cancer. One of the drawbacks of the treatments is that all of the kids miss significant time away from the classroom and as a result fall behind in school. The missed class time also means that kids are unable to continue to foster the relationships with their classmates.

This is what makes the Learning Center unique. Instead of being seen as outsiders due to their conditions from treatment, students at the facility will be attending the Learning Center with kids dealing with the same journey as them. Each student will receive personalized tutoring, music and art classes and movie nights of first run movies. In addition, there will be support groups for parents and siblings, date night for parents and Mommy and Me classes for preschool age children with cancer. The best part about the whole program is that it's FREE.

"The Learning Center will assist kids with their social and emotional needs and provide them with opportunities that they wouldn't have in a regular classroom setting," stated Meredith Kelly.

The Learning Center will serve the outpatient population from Hopkins, Maryland Medical Center and Sinai which means more than 500 children will be eligible for the Learning Center in its first year.

One of the first attendees at the Learning Center will be Meredith Kelly's daughter, Allison. When Meredith ran the Half-Marathon in 2009, Allison hadn't been diagnosed with Leukemia, but Meredith had grown up in a family struck by cancer and was excited to run for the cause. The thrill of running through her former and future hometown was an added bonus. Last year, Meredith raised money for Cool Kids by running the half-marathon again, but this year the event has "a whole new meaning" to her.

Earlier this year, Allison was diagnosed with ALL a form of Leukemia. With Allison's treatments taking up a majority of her time, Meredith had to scale back her training, but it wasn't enough to keep from participating in the event again, but this time in a new event - the four-person team relay. She likens the relay to her new journey, "Both events require friends and families to help you get through it together." Meredith's relay team is just one component of Allison's All-Stars, which is a group of 20 people raising money to help and support Cool Kids. Allison herself wants to run but that all depends on how her remaining treatments go. Either way, she'll be there at the finish line waiting for her All-Stars and hopefully several of her classmates.

When Allison attends the Learning Center and participates in Arts and Crafts, she'll be sitting in the room named for Steve Stuck's daughter - MacKenzie. MacKenzie was diagnosed with four brain tumors just months after the Cool Kids Campaign started and had been one of their most ardent supporters. "MacKenzie was part of a lot of groups," stated Steve, "but Cool Kids was her favorite."

While Steve participated in his first Baltimore Running Festival, MacKenzie and her sister were by his side as they took on the Kids Fun Run, a short run that takes kids ages 1-13 behind the rightfield wall of Camden Yards, down the Walk of Heroes and through the finish line like all the other runners at the BRF. Last year, Steve, who had knee surgery back in college, battled through the 5k as MacKenzie rested at home. Less than a week later, MacKenzie would pass away from the tumors.

This year, Steve will again take on the 5k while other members of Team MacKenzie will participate in other events including one of his daughters running the team relay and another in the Kids' Fun Run. Each runs with a heavy heart as the BRF is just days before MacKenzie's anniversary.

It's never easy to lose a child, but the Stucks are happy that MacKenzie's spirit will live on through the Learning Center. "She loved arts and crafts," added Steve "and the new Learning Center is phenomenal. It will allow kids to know there are others out there just like them. I can't say enough about the organization and will do whatever they need me to help."

As has been the case each of the last two years, Steve and Meredith will toe the starting line at the Baltimore Running Festival to begin their respective journeys through the streets Charm City. Though they still have yet to meet, their mindset remains the same - to promote the organization that helps kids with cancer feel like the coolest ones in the world.

For more information on the Cool Kids Campaign or the Learning Center, please visit www.coolkidscampaign.org.



(Top) Figure skating world champion Kimmie Meissner is taking what it means to be COOL to a whole new level.
(Bottom) The Cool Kids Learning Center enables young cancer patients to study and play alongside other youths who are facing the same journey.