

# BEVERLY HILLS COURIER

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## Tonight's Beverly Hills High Fundraiser For Tower Cancer Research Emphasizes Community

Part 3 in a three part series: Beverly Hills students recall heroic fight against cancer

By Laura Coleman

When the Beverly Hills High School boys and girls varsity soccer teams face off against Windward school in tonight's matches, they will not just be playing to win a game, they will be kicking for a cure in the battle against cancer.



Ali Norman-Franks, Grace Suomi, Gianna Casanova, Sienna Wolf and Cameron Asher

Nearly every person in attendance at tonight's "Imagine a Cure" fundraiser to benefit Tower Cancer Research Foundation will have been touched directly or indirectly by cancer. And chances are if someone has escaped knowing someone who has had a cancer diagnosis, or has fought and survived cancer, or is currently going through treatment, it's really only a matter of time before cancer changes their life. After all, it is a brutal and indiscriminate disease.

And while all diagnoses are uniquely tragic, being stricken as a child is particularly brutal.

According to Linda David, Executive Director of Tower, the Beverly Hills-based foundation that supports cancer research and various psycho-social programs, thousands of children die each year from cancer and thousands more are diagnosed with their lives forever changed.

To look at Gianna Casanova, an angelic Horace Mann first grader with gentle ringlets of brown and golden hair and a shy smile that belies her normally outgoing personality, it's almost impossible to imagine that she spent so much of the previous year in the hospital where doctors flooded her body with poison in an attempt to kill the cancer following her leukemia diagnosis at age 5. But of course, cancer isn't fair.

Like every other child who had been diagnosed with cancer that the *Courier* spoke with, Gianna radiates bravery.

"I don't feel scared," she said. Since her diagnosis last year Gianna has gone through more rounds of chemotherapy than her mother can recall—although she did remember there was one week Gianna had treatment four times. The cancer is gone now; however, she will continue to have maintenance treatments through next May. After that, the family will take a very long overdue trip to celebrate. Gianna hasn't chosen where exactly she wants to go yet, but Disney World is at the top of the list.

For El Rodeo 7th grader Grace Suomi, who was diagnosed with Ewing's sarcoma at the age of 5, her advice to any one going through treatment is to "stay strong."

She still recalls how terrifying the process was when it all began with her feeling the worst pain she'd ever experienced and going in for a blood test. Grace described having needles inserting all over her body – She recalled: "It felt like 6,000." – when in actuality it was just one, her mother later clarified.

After a surprise diagnosis revealed that she had a four-centimeter tumor in her skull, Grace underwent surgery followed by 14 rounds of chemotherapy and then 36 rounds of radiation treatment.

"I feel like I've always been such an open person and going through cancer made me much more comfortable around other people," said Grace, who just turned 13 this week and is already positive that she wants to be an interior designer when she grows up.



CANCER SUCKS – Local rock band Sorry is set to perform at 6 p.m. as part of tonight's fundraiser. Pictured (back row, from left): Beverly Vista Principal Christian Fuhrer, Bobby Bowman and Liv Slingerland; (front row, from left): Horace Mann teachers Belinda Maisterra, Rachel Pearce and Christy Fuhrer.

During her time at Children's Hospital Los Angeles (where she had surgery) and Mattel Children's Hospital UCLA (where she received treatments), she observed how some children would take home packets of catsup from the hospital. That understanding, that there were children going through similar frightening experiences whose families lacked resources to actually provide sufficient food, prompted her and her family to found Grace's Basket, a non-profit foundation committed to helping children who are receiving treatment.

Like Grace, 13-year-old Beverly Vista eighth grader Sienna Wolf feels an incredible need to give back. In fact, she just returned from speaking at a conference in Omaha, Nebraska where she detailed her own experience of being diagnosed with fibromyxoid sarcoma at the age of six.

She still vividly recalls that Halloween seven years ago when she fell down while trick-or-treating and couldn't get back up. Her mother, a doctor, knew something was wrong and upon examining Sienna discovered a tumor the size of an orange on her buttocks.

Two surgeries (including a return of the cancer in the same spot) and several treatments later Sienna became a cancer survivor.

"It was terrifying and it was hard," she recalled.

But it also changed her, even shaping her future career path; she wants to go to medical school and become a trauma surgeon.

"I'm definitely more considerate of what people are going through," said Sienna, who has volunteered with Chai Lifeline for the past seven years.

Beverly Vista seventh grader Cameron Asher, who was diagnosed with leukemia when he was in second grade, recalls how meaningful it was when a Chai Lifeline volunteer, a young person who had survived cancer, came to visit him while he was in the hospital getting treatments.

"I really appreciated the visit from someone who'd gone through it," he recalled.

With plans to go into computer programming and a love of math, science and English, Cameron seems like a typical middle school student. But like all other children who have confronted their own mortality at such a young age, his being has an added texture. And indeed, he is keenly aware of how precious life is—particularly so when he goes in for blood tests every three months to ensure that the cancer has not returned.

He's also aware that his experience changed his personality, making him a bit more timid.

"Part of it was staying in the hospital and having so much done to you," he explained.

Tower's Linda David emphasized that cancers, like people, are unique, and as such, emotional responses are always going to be different.

"Two people with the exact same cancer, given the exact same treatment, come out of it differently," she said. "They do say that cancer can be a gift. It changes your perspective on how you live your life and how you value life."

For Beverly Hills High School Intervention Counselor Ali Norman-Franks, who was diagnosed with ovarian cancer at the age of 20, her experi-