

~ Life in LAMORINDA ~

“A Strong Will” becomes Moraga family’s mantra

By Kara Navolio



Will, wearing his “superhero vest,” poses with his mom’s half-marathon medal. Photo provided

The lives of Moraga residents Kathy and John Walton changed forever on March 2 when their 2-year-old middle child, Will, was diagnosed with a rare form of blood cancer called Langerhans Cell Histiocytosis. The disease affects 1 in 200,000 children.

middle of the night. The next morning he woke up screaming and could barely walk,” recalled Kathy Walton. The tumor in his spine caused his vertebra to fracture, which created additional complications for Will, who is now 3. He must wear a back brace, his “superhero vest,” at all times when he is awake.

Walton, who is an attorney, took a leave of absence to stay home with Will and their youngest child, since Will can no longer attend preschool due to his compromised immune system and the risk falling presents for his fractured back. She has turned their home into an art and activity center for the two youngsters, while their oldest child now attends kindergarten. Despite Will’s chemotherapy treatments, he is still an active, curious boy who loves music, art and the solar system. He also enjoys his special swing, which allows him to soar without the risk of falling.

John Walton, a radiologist at Kaiser Oakland, has the unique responsibility of being part of his own child’s care team as he administers Will’s chemotherapy at home. Will has three more treatments to go and is now in remission.

The Waltons, who met in

2008 at a Team in Training event for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, decided to run in the Walnut Creek half-marathon on Dec. 9 with the goal of raising \$3,000 for the HistoCURE foundation. Since this cancer is so rare, there is not a lot of funding for research. The organization is 100 percent volunteer-run, which means all the money raised goes directly to research. In September they started training and telling family and friends. The exercise and focus helped Kathy recover emotionally from the incredible events the family has been through this year. Kathy posted some information on Nextdoor.com and a Lamorinda Moms blog and soon had raised over \$20,000 with nine people joining them to run with “A Strong Will” team.

“The incredible support that Kathy and I have received through Facebook messages, emails, texts, prayers and donations to the HistoCURE foundation in honor of our son has been nothing short of amazing,” John wrote on Facebook. “I cannot thank you all enough for your generosity and kindness. We have truly been moved.”

All 11 members of the team completed the half-marathon, raising \$34,055 from 205 donors for the HistoCURE foundation. “John and I finished the race together in about two hours and 20 minutes,” Kathy reflected after the race. “Thoughts of Will and what he had been through was the only thing keeping me going the last two miles. John and I talked

about how we could run for 20 more minutes because Will is such a champ during his chemo. We said we could keep running for Will who couldn’t walk for weeks. We also sang his current favorite song about the states and capitals in the United States.”

At a post-race party, generously sponsored by Noah’s, Peet’s, Whole Foods and the Hideout Kitchen & Café, Kathy stated, “My optimism about the future is a direct result of your help in making this campaign a huge success. A few months ago, I hit rock bottom as I began to feel the aftershock of Will’s diagnosis. I was angry that he had to go through this; I feared that his tumors would return and claim another bone, or worse; and I felt isolated from the outside world. It was time to do something to take control over the uncontrollable. With your help, we have raised an amazing amount of money to fund research to improve treatment for Will and patients like him. My hope is that Will’s cancer will never recur, but I am comforted that if it does, we have done everything we can to ensure his treatment plan will be based on hard science and trial studies. Also, with your help, my spirits have been lifted as I realized that I am surrounded by amazing friends, neighbors, and family who have rallied around Will as if he were their own child.”

Donations to the HistoCURE foundation can still be made at: www.histocure.org/page/events.



A “Strong Will” team completes Walnut Creek half-marathon, raising over \$28,000 for the HistoCURE Foundation. Team photography courtesy Catherine Hall



Will gets a visit from Spiderman during a stay at Kaiser Oakland. Photo provided

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