

Anna's Angels Embarks on Fourth Year of Fundraising, Funding Down Syndrome Research

Written By Jennifer H. Gilmore; Photography By Brian Mullins

Almost four years after the Anna's Angels Foundation was founded in honor of a little brown-headed girl living with Down syndrome and having battled leukemia as a toddler, the outlook for research into these conditions has taken quantum leaps in ways that still amaze Michelle Pfeiffer, Anna's mom and foundation founder.

"We were quickly introduced to the issues of Down syndrome and leukemia — common and oddly very treatable in Down syndrome children — when Anna was born into our family in 2001," recalled Pfeiffer, "and at the same time, we were disappointed at how little was known about these conditions."

Michelle and her husband, Andy Mer-

rills, wanted to change that, not only for the sake of their daughter, but for the multitudes of children with Down syndrome who deserve to reach their potential in a world where research can make rapid strides with money dedicated to making it happen.

With an annual signature gala, tennis tournament, 10 Miler run and other fundraisers, Anna's Angels has already pumped \$70,000 into Duke University research into Down syndrome-related issues. Another \$100,000 is being awarded between January and March.

"We were impressed with the quality of the applications we received," Pfeiffer remarked. "We are attracting top researchers who may have never considered researching these matters before."

To date, the foundation has funded research into issues surrounding congenital heart disease, the development of a critical new iron deficiency test and a potential drug treatment commonly used for Alzheimer's patients that could benefit people with Down syndrome. The foundation has also funded the development of a national Down syndrome registry database so that doctors and researchers can better share data.

Anna's Angels is now embarking on key research that will help detect amblyopia in children with Down syndrome as well as infants and other children with special needs.

"This project is pulling together top pediatric ophthalmology researchers that will partner with the comprehensive Down

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syndrome team all right here at Duke,” said Pfeiffer. “This type of collaboration is one of our main goals.”

The foundation is gearing up for another fundraising season to be kicked off by The Merrill Lynch Fourth Annual Anna’s Angels Gala and The Second Annual Pro Am Tennis Tournament, to be held April 21 at Prestonwood Country Club. “This is the first year we’ve had a title sponsor, and we are so grateful to Merrill Lynch for taking that important step,” said Pfeiffer. Nortel and Capital Bank also have been key sponsors of the event.

In addition to the Anna’s Angels 10 Miler scheduled for the fall, the foundation has added a new fundraiser, the “Heavenly Goodness Cookbook,” which was compiled by the Prestonwood Ladies’ Tennis Association. Pfeiffer and her friends tested every recipe in the book, which will be available by early summer. Anna’s Angels is preselling the book for \$25.

To learn more about Anna’s Angels, its research, and its fundraising events, go to www.annas-angels.org. To purchase gala tickets or the “Heavenly Goodness Cookbook,” contact Anna’s Angels at info@annas-angels.org.



Chairman of Duke Pediatrics Dr. Joseph St. Geme III and Dr. Priya Kishnani, one of the key researchers in pediatric medical genetics, with their favorite patient Anna Merrills at Duke Children’s Hospital

Anna Merrills, now 5, is in an inclusive kindergarten class at Green Hope Elementary School. According to Pfeiffer, she loves school and has lots of friends in her class, whom her teachers have affectionately dubbed “Anna’s Fan Club.”

“We are very fortunate to have such wonderful teachers and such a supportive school that fosters inclusion,” added Pfeiffer.

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