

Duke's Dr. St. Geme Speaks at Anna's Angels Gala

WRITTEN BY LEA HART | PHOTOGRAPHED BY KITTIE DEEMER

DR. JOSEPH ST. GEME, chair of the Department of Pediatrics at Duke University Medical Center, will headline the Sixth Annual Anna's Angels Gala this April at Prestonwood Country Club.

"He's been a wonderful advocate for Anna's Angels," said Michelle Pfeiffer, director and co-founder of Anna's Angels.

Pfeiffer is mother to 7-year-old Anna, who was born with Down syndrome. Pfeiffer and her husband created Anna's Angels, The Anna Michelle Merrills Foundation for Down Syndrome Research, in 2003. The organization provides funds to promote research of Down syndrome. They awarded their first research grants in 2005 and continue to award grants on an annual basis. A scientific advisory panel of four leading physicians from Duke University Medical Center as well as both Pfeiffer and her husband review grant applications.

Each year, the gala raises a notable amount of money for these grants. Last year, the gala raised \$125,000 and more than 300 people attended. Anna's Angels also raises funds through the annual Anna's Angels 10-Miler and 5K Runs.

This year's gala will include a live and silent auction, dinner, music, dancing and remarks from St. Geme.

St. Geme has served as chair of the Department of Pediatrics since 2005. He oversees clinical activities and research in the department. St. Geme is the recipient of numerous awards and is a nationally recognized expert in basic research and clinical treatment for pediatric infectious diseases, according to Duke.

"He's an amazing individual," Pfeiffer said. "He's helped us tremendously at Duke."

In five years, Anna's Angels has awarded \$400,000 in research grants. This past fall, they awarded \$155,000 in grants.

"What Duke has done with the money is truly amazing," Pfeiffer said.

The grants awarded in fall 2008 went to fund four different research areas. One involves the link between leukemia and individuals with Down syndrome. They develop leukemia at a higher rate than those without Down

syndrome, but they also have a higher cure rate, Pfeiffer said. Currently, no one knows why and she hopes the grant will allow those answers to be explored. It's an issue near to Pfeiffer's heart, as Anna was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia, also known as AML, in 2002, underwent chemotherapy and recovered.

Other areas being explored thanks to last fall's grants include research in speech development in Down syndrome individuals and looking for patterns; exploring the use and benefits of antioxidants; and researching bronchial problems faced by Down syndrome individuals.

"The research speaks for itself," Pfeiffer said. "We cut across a nice variety of issues that affect families."

The Sixth Anna's Angels Gala will be held on April 18. More information can be found at the Anna's Angels Web site: www.annas-angels.org.

