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## **A Place for Hope**

*By Harriet Riley*

Connie Cervantes is a single mother with three children – ages 2, 8 and 10. Two and a half years ago, she worked hard and made a nice life for her children in a home filled with love. She had savings and was always generous when extended family members needed help. But when her four-month-old baby, Fernando, was diagnosed with a brain tumor in August of 2007, her world slowly began to fall apart.

Since then Connie has lost her job, her apartment, and has had to move five times with her children. “I’ve never had to ask for help. I was the one who helped my family,” said the perky, pretty dark-eyed young woman. Last winter she said she “broke down and realized she couldn’t make it without help.” She was not able to pay for her apartment and had nowhere else to turn. She had used all her savings, lost her car and had even

starting selling personal items. Her son was still under constant medical care. That's when she turned to the Houston-based charity, Project Joy and Hope, for assistance. Referred by her hospital social worker to PJ&H, Connie and her children were able to move in one of their furnished apartments and receive the care and support they needed.

Project Joy and Hope's sole focus is to enhance the quality of life of children and families, like the Cervantes, who live with life-limiting conditions. Connie and her children live in a HOPE Housing Program apartment, with utilities paid and financial grant support for help with food and other basic living expenses through PJ&H.

Project Joy and Hope is the result of a vision of Dr. Jan Wheeler, educator, inspirational speaker and author. Jan envisioned this helping agency during her own daughter's battle with Ewing's sarcoma. She saw PJ&H as a way to support other parents and children during their journey through their child's life-limiting illness. Jan's daughter Valerie Grace Wheeler died in 1999. As a mother and an educator, Jan dedicated her life's work to her daughter's memory and started Project Joy and Hope. She knows what Connie is experiencing and has a whole team of volunteers to help meet this mother's needs.

"We just try to help meet the needs of these families during a time when they sometimes don't have anywhere else to turn," said Jan.

“They are always calling to check on me and see what I need. I don’t know what I would have done if I hadn’t gotten this help,” said Connie. “I was to a point where I had no where to go anymore.”

Connie said that when the baby was first diagnosed with a brain tumor, it was like a dream (or nightmare), and she just functioned from day to day. Fernando was in Texas Children’s Hospital from August until November 2007 undergoing aggressive treatment for his tumor. That’s when Connie had to stop working. Finally, just before Connie’s November 24 birthday and Thanksgiving, the doctors told her that treatment was not successful and her baby would die. Fernando was put under hospice care and his mother took him home to die. Connie said that was probably her worst time. She’d take the two older children to school everyday and then go home and hold the baby and cry all day. Then she’d get up and pick up the children and try to act normal and play with them in the evenings, and then the next day she’d do the same thing all over again. The baby weighed five pounds and had lost his eyesight and had kidney issues and seizures.

By March of 2008, Fernando was still holding on, but had multiple problems. Connie took him back to Texas Children’s Hospital where he had yet another surgery to remove fluid from his brain. After that the baby began to gain more weight. At 18 months old, in August of 2008, the doctors asked Connie if she would consider taking Fernando out of hospice and let them starting treating him again. The medical professionals still knew the baby’s cancer was not curable, but they felt like they might

be able to find some answers from Fernando's treatment that might help other sick babies. Connie agreed, feeling like their ordeal would have meaning if they could help others.

Today at two and a half years old, Fernando weighs 40 pounds and is blind and unable to walk, but he's a loving and strong, happy baby. He doesn't talk, but he shows his love by putting his head on his mother's chest. She said he hears really well and knows immediately if someone is nearby. Connie's life is still consumed with Fernando's constant medical procedures and hospital visits, but he's made his mother a better person, she says. "He's made me stronger and made me appreciate things I didn't even see before. His presence in my life has increased my faith in God and made me enjoy God's gifts each day."

Connie has no idea how long she'll be dealing with Fernando's illness since his chance of survival has not increased. "I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow," she said, "but my dream is to save money and someday help other moms deal with seriously ill babies. It's happening for a reason."

Meanwhile, Project Joy and Hope will continue to assist families like the Cervantes deal with life-limiting illnesses. If you'd like to help, Project Joy and Hope needs sponsors for its annual fundraiser – the 2009 Annual Golf Classic and Gala this

October. Please check out their website at [www.joyandhope.org](http://www.joyandhope.org) or call toll free 1-866-  
JOYHOPE or 713-944-6569.