

REGIONAL

# VUEPOINT

## PROJECT JOY & HOPE

Jan Wheeler reaches out  
to families with children  
in hospice care

## Tough Job Requires Tougher Volunteers

Area Firemen put  
our community first

## Starfish Kenya

A local mission  
of international  
compassion

## SPECIAL VOLUNTEER EDITION



As an educator, inspirational speaker, author and mother, Dr. Jan Wheeler never fathomed that her life experience, combined with all of her knowledge and skills, would take her on her current journey.

Jan lost her daughter, Valerie, to cancer in 1999. A new journey began.



# PROJECT Joy &

A Mother's Grief • Artist Unknown

Today, Wheeler reaches out to children and their families as they share similar experiences, usually in their last days together. For the last seven years, she has helped numerous families through the organization she created, Project Joy & Hope. The mission of the non-profit is to promote both physical and psychological care for children, and families of children, with life-limiting illnesses. Project Joy & Hope accomplishes this goal in a number of ways – very broadly through community awareness, education, and program and resource development.

Valerie Grace Wheeler learned she had Ewing's sarcoma a few months after celebrating her 13th birthday. An exceptional girl, her friends and family called her Val, while many called her "Amazing Grace." In that short 28 months between diagnosis and passing, she touched hundreds of people with her determination, courage, attitude and spiritual strength. Valerie died June 25, 1999, before she could begin her sophomore year of high school.

"She [Valerie] had such a positive attitude and was always looking to share what she had with other people. She taught me what it means to be giving, to be willing and to be kind," Wheeler said. One day as they left the hospital after a treatment session, a beam of sunlight shined into their car. Wheeler remembers that Valerie, weak and frail from her cancer treatment, reached out to her mother and said, "I don't know why this happened to me but I believe for some reason people are going to be changed. They are going to wake up and see the sunshine and be glad for another day."



# Hope

by Royce A. Walker

While Wheeler found herself in the midst of her doctoral residency, her daughter became increasingly ill, so for the next year she withdrew from the program. “I immersed myself in supporting her through that journey,” Wheeler said. “During her remission, I returned to college. But, she relapsed and I withdrew again and took care of her at home with the help of a pediatric hospice program. The experience had a real profound influence on my life because I went through the experience not only as a mom but as an educator. You see it through different eyes.”

“Grief is a metamorphosis, and it took me a while to walk through that and get a focus, so the hard part was to get people to believe this [Project Joy & Hope] was not a short term effort.” Wheeler has seen that change become a reality with her organization. She had her purpose. Now, she needed to finance it.

The challenge of starting a project such as this is funding. “We started with nothing and I had to find those individuals who shared my vision,” Wheeler said. “Every mother wants her child’s death to have a purpose. I was motivated by the experiences with Valerie, but I was very adamant that this organization not be named after her. This is about the families and the children that come after Valerie that go through the same experience.”

And, Valerie had a part in the genesis of the organization, she left behind a collection of art that created the funds to begin helping other children facing death. In her final months, she produced a number of paintings. These paintings, in turn, were used as the artwork on inspirational cards that also included a picture of Valerie and the story of Project Joy & Hope.

To continue its work, Project Joy & Hope hosts an annual gala and golf classic every fall on Columbus Day weekend. The event began with a golf tournament in 2000 with the gala added the third year. In its seventh year, it has continued to grow with close to 500 attending, including sponsors and supporters, and netting more than \$130,000 in 2006 alone. Last year's golf tournament hosted 72 teams for the day's competition. "It was a big day for us," Wheeler said. "We doubled the number of the teams at this year's event."

Project Joy & Hope has continued to experience growth each year. In the first year, Wheeler ran the organization by herself. With its tremendous development, it has expanded to a paid part-time staff of two and more than 300 volunteers.

"Mine was a unique experience in that I was able to provide for my daughter at home," Wheeler said. "This is not true for all families whether it be because of distance from medical services, loss of income or lack of a support system." A resident of the east Harris County area since 1979, Wheeler leaned on her friends and her faith to help her daughter and their family. But as an educator she met those who were not only faced with a life-threatening condition of their child, but also with unmet financial, emotional and medical needs.

One of those gaps included housing for families who live too far away from medical centers to receive the needed palliative and supportive care. Although other programs provide for families when children are fighting the disease, dying children are not a part of these programs. Also, younger adults, ages 18-22, are excluded from most programs. Project Joy & Hope provides four fully-furnished apartments within 20



Valerie Wheeler and her art

minutes of the Texas Medical Center to any qualifying family to utilize for 30 days after a child no longer requires hospice services. The facility is fully furnished with a stocked food pantry and linens. Volunteers assist the family with errands and other needs.

Education has become another mission of the program, reaching out to parents, teachers and the medical community in Texas to develop better pediatric and end-of-life care programs. Hospice care did not begin to develop in the United States until the 1970s, and only in the last few years has pediatric hospice care emerged.

Hospice care, defined as care of people who are very ill and within six months of dying from their illness, involves pain management and comfort for these patients. Palliative care seeks to be a source of comfort not only to the patient, but also to the entire family system.

Families with a terminally ill child often require financial assistance for their other children as a result of substantial medical costs. For this reason, the organization established a scholarship program to help surviving children obtain a college education. Any child who has experienced the death of a parent or sibling is eligible for the fund. In the last five years, more than \$100,000 in scholarships have been awarded to Bay Area students.

A small board of directors, many of which have been with the organization since its inception, have helped Wheeler in her journey of making this vision a reality. She's proud of the fact that more people are beginning to recognize the name, "Project Joy & Hope."

Wheeler sums up her experience as a blessing, "To whom much is given, much is required. We are each here to use our gifts. Project Joy & Hope gives help to people at a very dark time in their lives. We offer help through that end-of-journey and beyond. It's important for people to know that there is hope to be had." •

*For more information on services or volunteer opportunities, please contact Jan Wheeler at 713-944-6507 or toll free at 1-866-JoyHope or visit [www.joyandhope.org](http://www.joyandhope.org)*