

Changing Lives: Mitchell Thorp Foundation

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Finding out a child is gravely ill ranks among parents' worst nightmares. Most moms and dads won't ever have to experience the moment a medical diagnosis changes everything in an instant. But Beth and Brad Thorp know exactly how devastating it truly can be.

In 2009, less than a year after their 16-year-old son Mitchell died from an undiagnosed disease, the Thorps formed the Mitchell Thorp Foundation to help other San Diego families whose lives have been upended as theirs were when their son got sick.

"Hardships become a way of life from that moment on," says Beth, who helms the nonprofit with help from her husband. "One parent often has to quit their job, but the bills keep coming in. It's a spiral effect that hits the family hard. We're here to help financially and spiritually. And a big part of our mission is to keep the family together, because the stress load is just so immense. All you can focus on is how to heal your child."

Traci Rico can attest to that. She and her husband Tony have two sick kids at home, 9-year-old Tanner and 13-year-old Pria. Tanner was just over a year old when he was diagnosed with Duchenne muscular dystrophy, a genetic disorder with a life expectancy that tops out at 20. Two weeks after that heartbreaking discovery, the Ricos learned that their daughter had recurring wart-like growths on her larynx that require surgical removal to avoid suffocation (Pria just underwent her 59th operation). To make matters worse, Tony recently threw out his back while lifting Tanner into his wheelchair.

"Nobody expects to have a sick child," says Traci, who juggles her role as sole income provider with her family's needs. "But sometimes life takes a different turn. It's quite a blow and it drains the wallet big time."

The Mitchell Thorp Foundation has helped the Ricos with everything from rent to airfare to get Tanner to specialists. The organization also

advocates on behalf of patients. "They are my angels and my community," says Traci, who relies on the other families helped by the foundation — more than 50 so far — for support as well. "There are times when I think that I can't even relate to other parents. I don't know what it's like to have healthy children."

The Ricos do their own fundraising for Mitchell Thorp in support of Tanner (www.weelittlemanrico.com), including lemonade stands and Mitchell Thorp's annual walk/run in February — it's the foundation's biggest event of the year and takes place at Carlsbad's Thorp Field, named for Mitchell, who adored baseball. The nonprofit also relies on private and corporate donations along with money raised during one-off events like Carlsbad's Music for Hope on May 3, a concert featuring Alaina Blair, Cody Lovaas, and Lindsey Carrier (www.mitchellthorp.org/events). The Thorps also have a fashion show planned for September.

"Usually it's the middle class families that get hurt the worst," says Brad. "They have insurance, but it's not the best insurance. They get laid off because they miss work."

"A lot of families are hesitant to come forward to ask for support," adds Beth. "We went through that same process."

The Thorps press on in honor of their beloved son. "He had a large spirit that lives on through the foundation," says Beth, her voice wavering a little. "It lives and breathes that feeling of hope and light and goodness." (www.mitchellthorp.org)

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