

## Islander's mission fosters healing for cancer patients and caregivers

By Lanette S. Macaruso

Since its February debut at Providence's Avon Theater, the documentary film, *From the Mouths of Babes*, has inspired in its viewer a unique joie de vivre. The film, a joint effort of Jamestown's Santi Meunier-Curren and fellow psychotherapist Miriam Goldsmith, features four children abiding the rigors of their individual battles with cancer, all the while expressing a tender appreciation for the gifts of the moment.

For its co-producers, *From the Mouths of Babes* has launched a mission of help and support to those whom cancer strikes, and to those who care for them. It is a cause célèbre among many Jamestowners who have helped the non-profit group behind it — Connections to Life — to carry on the work launched at the film's debut.

The film fulfills a promise Meunier-Curren made to her godchild, Jessie Bullens-Crewe, who died in 1996 at the age of 11 from Hodgkins Lymphoma. The promise was that Meunier would honor the child in a film that would help others in similar straits. She said, "I remember Jesse reassured her loved ones that she was not in pain, and not afraid. I was struck by the powerful sense of peace she transmitted."

Jesse's illness, however, progressed rapidly. "By the time I assembled a film crew, Meunier observed, "Jesse had slipped into a coma and died — just four months after her diagnosis."

Meunier began working with the Maine Medical Center in Portland where Jesse had been a patient. She also approached Duke University Hospital in North Carolina to locate children who might allow her to videotape them during treatment. In 1996, she met Miriam Goldsmith, a fellow psychotherapist who had waged her own successful battle against acute Myelocytic Leukemia in 1993. The two committed themselves to working together on the film project.

Lauren McKenna, one of the film's three surviving youngsters, received a transfusion of stem cells to replace all her own diseased blood cells. This prompted Meunier and Goldsmith to explore the possibility of creating a film about stem cell treatments by partnering with Duke University Medical Hospital, a leader in such interventions. Says Meunier, "We want to show how umbilical cords — normally discarded after birth — can be processed for their stem cells,

which can save a child's life." Among the film's most evocative passages are those featuring 11-year-old Isaiah Desrosiers, who passed away in November, 2000. At this year's film debut, his parents, Daniel and Ginger Desrosiers, remarked, "Now we know how we can help families deal with this kind of difficulty."

That expresses the most important use that Meunier and Goldsmith intend for the film: that it be a basis for the non-profit group the two founded to provide comfort, inspiration and knowledge to cancer patients and their caregivers, Connections to Life.

On August 31, Meunier and Goldsmith sponsored a Jamestown fundraiser they called "Wellness Day," a day when attendees pampered themselves with hair cuts, manicures, shiatsu, and chiropractic, and reflexology mini-treatments donated by area health and beauty practitioners. Participants could also enjoy learning elements of wellness from Meunier, who is a "success" coach, and breathing lessons from Goldsmith, who is a voice coach. All proceeds helped fund additional film projects, some of which will focus on teenagers, women and single mothers afflicted with cancer.

Notes Meunier, "Fundraisers help us provide the film — which sells for \$20 — to churches, treatment centers and families free of charge." Meunier reports that Connections to Life has enjoyed

At the opening of their film last February, Santi Meunier, Miriam Goldsmith take a moment for a picture with children featured in their film: Chelsea, Lauren and Victor.



support from Hasbro Hospital and several other organizations, and is seeking help from the Ronald MacDonald House. Next June, the group will be a part of The Taste of New York.

Meunier acknowledges that Jamestowners have served as a vital foundation of support. Islanders Sidney Waller, Catheryn Jamieson and Jack Biddick are three of the four board members of Connections to Life's, and many local friends have supported the effort, including Mansions & Manors' Gloria Kurz.

As for connections Meunier sees between the children she has observed and her philosophies as a mental health practitioner, she notes thoughtfully, "When I see these kids and how well they bear up under such challenges, I realize

how important it is to do this healing work, whether it is to help others recover from abuse or addiction or grief."

Meunier, the author of three books, has frequently donated proceeds from the sale of *Islands in Heaven*, a children's

book she wrote for families faced with the loss of a child.

Beginning next week, Meunier will have a column — called *Santi Says* running weekly in 02835 — The Jamestown Journal.



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